A History of God
The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam

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"Witty, informative, and contemplative. Ms. Armstrong can simplify complex ideas...."
—The New York Times Book Review
Others reverently speak of God's sexuality and have introduced a female element into the divine.

This brings me to a difficult point. Because this God began as a specifically male deity, monotheists have usually referred to it as 'he'. In recent years, feminists have understandably objected to this. Since I shall be recording the thoughts and insights of people who called God 'he', I have used the conventional masculine terminology, except when 'it' has been more appropriate. Yet it is perhaps worth mentioning that the masculine tenor of God-talk is particularly problematic in English. In Hebrew, Arabic and French, however, grammatical gender gives theological discourse a sort of sexual counterpoint and dialectic, which provides a balance that is often lacking in English. Thus in Arabic al-Lah (the supreme name for God) is grammatically masculine, but the word for the divine and inscrutable essence of God - al-Dhat - is feminine.

All talk about God staggers under impossible difficulties. Yet monotheists have all been very positive about language at the same time as they have denied its capacity to express the transcendent reality. The God of Jews, Christians and Muslims is a God who -in some sense - speaks. His Word is crucial in all three faiths. The Word of God has shaped the history of our culture. We have to decide whether the word 'God' has any meaning for us today.

Note: Since I am looking at the history of God from the Jewish, Christian and Muslim perspective, the terms 'BC' and 'AD', which are conventionally used in the West, are not appropriate. I have therefore had recourse to the alternatives 'BCE' (Before the Common Era) and 'CE' (Common Era).

1 - In the Beginning.

In the beginning, human beings created a God who was the First Cause of all things and Ruler of heaven and earth. He was not represented by images and had no temple or priests in his service. He was too exalted for an inadequate human cult. Gradually he faded from the consciousness of his people. He had become so remote that they decided that they did not want him any more. Eventually he was said to have disappeared.

That, at least, is one theory, popularised by Father Wilhelm Schmidt in *The Origin of the Idea of God*, first published in 1912. Schmidt suggested that there had been a primitive monotheism before men and women had started to worship a number of gods. Originally they had acknowledged only one Supreme Deity, who had created the world and governed human affairs from afar. Belief in such a High God (sometimes called the Sky God, since he is associated with the heavens) is still a feature of the religious life in many indigenous African tribes. They yearn towards God in prayer; believe that he is watching over them and will punish wrong-doing. Yet he is strangely absent from their daily lives: he has no special cult and is never depicted in effigy. The tribesmen say that he is inexpressible and cannot be contaminated by the world of men. Some people say that he has 'gone away'. Anthropologists suggest that this God has become so distant and exalted that he has in effect been replaced by lesser spirits and more accessible gods. So too, Schmidt's theory goes, in ancient times, the High God was replaced by the more attractive gods of the Pagan pantheons. In the beginning, therefore, there was One God. If there is so, then monotheism was one of the earliest ideas evolved by human beings to explain the mystery and tragedy of life. It also indicates some of the problems that such a deity might have to face.

It is impossible to prove this one way or the other. There have been many theories about the origin of religion. Yet it seems that creating gods is something that human beings have always done. When one religious idea ceases to work for them, it is simply replaced. These ideas disappear quietly, like the Sky God, with no great fanfare. In our own day, many people would say that the God worshipped for centuries by Jews, Christians and Muslims has become as remote as the Sky God. Some have actually claimed that he has died. Certainly he seems to be disappearing from the lives of an increasing number of people, especially in Western Europe. They speak of a 'God-shaped hole' in their consciousness where he used to be, because, irrelevant though he may seem in certain quarters, he has played a crucial role in our history and has been one of the greatest human ideas of all time. To understand what we are losing - if, that is, he really is disappearing - we need to see what people were doing when they began to worship this God, what he meant and how he was conceived. To do that we need to go back to the ancient world of the Middle East where the idea of our God gradually emerged about 14,000 years ago.

One of the reasons why religion seems irrelevant today is that many of us no longer have the sense that we are surrounded by the unseen. Our scientific culture educates us to focus our attention on the physical and material world in front of us. This method of looking at the world has achieved great results. One of its consequences, however, is that we have, as it were, edited out the sense of the 'spiritual' or the 'holy' which pervades the lives of people in more traditional societies at every level and which was once an essential component of our human experience of the world. In the South Sea Islands, they call
this mysterious force mana; others experience it as a presence or spirit; sometimes it has been felt as an impersonal power, like a form of radioactivity or electricity. It was believed to reside in the tribal chief, in plants, rocks or animals. The Latins experienced numina (spirits) in sacred groves; Arabs felt that the landscape was populated by the jinn. Naturally people wanted to get in touch with this reality and make it work for them, but they also simply wanted to admire it. When they personalised the unseen forces and made them gods, associated with the wind, sun, sea and stars but possessing human characteristics, they were expressing their sense of affinity with the unseen and with the world around them.

Rudolf Otto, the German historian of religion who published his important book The Idea of the Holy in 1917, believed that this sense of the 'numinous' was basic to religion. It preceded any desire to explain the origin of the world or find a basis for ethical behaviour. The numinous power was sensed by human beings in different ways - sometimes it inspired wild, bacchanalian excitement; sometimes a deep calm; sometimes people felt dread, awe and humility in the presence of the mysterious force inherent in every aspect of life. When people began to devise their myths and worship their gods, they were not seeking to find a literal explanation for natural phenomena. The symbolic stories, cave paintings and carvings were an attempt to express their wonder and to link this pervasive mystery with their own lives; indeed, poets, artists and musicians are often impelled by a similar desire today. In the Palaeolithic period, for example, when agriculture was developing, the cult of the Mother Goddess expressed a sense that the fertility which was transforming human life was actually sacred. Artists carved those statues depicting her as a naked, pregnant woman which archaeologists have found all over Europe, the Middle East and India. The Great Mother remained imaginatively important for centuries. Like the old Sky God, she was absorbed into later pantheons and took her place alongside the older deities. She was usually one of the most powerful of the gods, certainly more powerful than the Sky God, who remained a rather shadowy figure. She was called Inana in ancient Sumeria, Ishtar in Babylon, Anat in Canaan, Isis in Egypt and Aphrodite in Greece, and remarkably similar stories were devised in all these cultures to express her role in the spiritual lives of the people. These myths were not intended to be taken literally but were metaphorical attempts to describe a reality that was too complex and elusive to express in any other way. These dramatic and evocative stories of gods and goddesses helped people to articulate their sense of the powerful but unseen forces that surrounded them.

Indeed, it seems that in the ancient world people believed that it was only by participating in this divine life that they would become truly human. Earthly life was obviously fragile and overshadowed by mortality, but if men and women imitated the actions of the gods they would share to some degree their greater power and effectiveness. Thus it was said that the gods had shown men how to build their cities and temples, which were mere copies of their own homes in the divine realm. The sacred world of the gods - as recounted in myth - was not just an ideal towards which men and women should aspire but was the prototype of human existence; it was the original pattern or the archetype on which our life here below had been modelled. Everything on earth was thus believed to be a replica of something in the divine world, a perception that informed the mythology, ritual and social organisation of most of the cultures of antiquity and continues to influence more traditional societies in our own day. [1] In ancient Iran, for example, every single person or object in the mundane world (getik) was held to have its counterpart in the archetypal world of sacred reality (menok). This is a perspective that is difficult for us to appreciate in the modern world, since we see autonomy and independence as supreme human values. Yet the famous tag post coitum omne animal tristis est still expresses a common experience: after an intense and eagerly anticipated moment, we often feel that we have missed something greater that remains just beyond our grasp. The imitation of a god is still an important religious notion: resting on the Sabbath or washing somebody's feet on Maundy Thursday - actions that are meaningless in themselves - are now significant and sacred because people believe that they were once performed by God.

A similar spirituality had characterised the ancient world of Mesopotamia. The Tigris-Euphrates valley, in what is now Iraq, had been inhabited as early as 4000 BCE by the people known as the Sumerians who had established one of the first great cultures of the Oikumene (the civilised world). In their cities of Ur, Erech and Kish, the Sumerians devised their cuneiform script, built the extraordinary temple-towers called ziggurats and evolved an impressive law, literature and mythology. Not long afterwards the region was invaded by the Semitic Akkadians, who had adopted the language and culture of Sumer. Later still, in about 2000 BCE, the Amorites had conquered this Sumerian-Akkadian civilisation and made Babylon their capital. Finally, some 500 years later, the Assyrians had settled in nearby Ashur and eventually conquered Babylon itself during the eighth century BCE. This Babylonian tradition also affected the mythology and religion of Canaan, which would become the Promised Land of the ancient Israelites. Like other people in the ancient world, the Babylonians attributed their cultural achievements to the gods, who had revealed their own lifestyle to their mythical ancestors. Thus Babylon itself was supposed to be an image of heaven, with each one of its temples a replica of a celestial palace. This link with the divine world was celebrated and perpetuated annually in the great New Year Festival, which had been firmly established by the seventeenth century BCE. Celebrated in the holy city of Babylon during the month of Nisan - our April - the Festival solemnly enthroned the king and established his reign for another year. Yet this political stability could only endure in so far as it participated in the more enduring and effective government of the gods, who had brought order out of primordial chaos.
when they had created the world. The eleven sacred days of the Festival thus projected the participants outside profane
time into the sacred and eternal world of the gods by means of ritual gestures. A scapegoat was killed to cancel the old,
dying year; the public humiliation of the king and the enthronement of a carnival king in his place re-produced the original
chaos; a mock-battle re-enacted the struggle of the gods against the forces of destruction.

These symbolic actions thus had a sacramental value; they enabled the people of Babylon to immerse themselves in the
sacred power or mana on which their own great civilisation depended. Culture was felt to be a fragile achievement, which
could always fall prey to the forces of disorder and disintegration. On the afternoon of the fourth day of Festival, priests and
choristers filed into the Holy of Holies to recite the Enuma Elish, the epic poem which celebrated the victory of the gods
over chaos. The story was not a factual account of the physical gins of life upon earth but was a deliberately symbolic
attempt to suggest a great mystery and to release its sacred power. A literal account of creation was impossible, since
nobody had been present at these unimaginable events: myth and symbol were thus the only suitable way of describing
them. A brief look at the Enuma Elish gives us some insight into the spirituality which gave birth to our own Creator God
centuries later. Even though the biblical and Koranic account of creation would ultimately take a very different form, these
strange myths never entirely disappeared but would re-enter the history of God at a much later date, clothed in a
monotheistic idiom. The story begins with the creation of the gods themselves - a theme which, as we shall see, would be
very important in Jewish and Muslim mysticism. In the beginning, said the Enuma Elish, the gods emerged two by two from
a formless, watery waste - a substance which was itself divine. In Babylonian myth - as later in the Bible - there was no
creation out of nothing, an idea that was alien to the ancient world. Before either the gods or human beings existed, this
sacred raw material had existed from all eternity. When the Babylonians tried to imagine this primordial divine stuff, they
thought that it must have been similar to the swampy wasteland of Mesopotamia, where floods constantly threatened to
wipe out the frail works of men. In the Enuma Elish, chaos is not a fiery, seething mass, therefore, but a sloppy mess where
everything lacks boundary, definition and identity:

When sweet and bitter
mingled together, no reed was plaited,
no rushes muddied the water,
the gods were nameless, natureless, futureless. {2}

Then three gods did emerge from the primal wasteland: Apsu (identified with the sweet waters of the rivers), his wife Tiamat
(the salty sea) and Mummu, the Womb of chaos. Yet these gods were, so to speak, an early, inferior model which needed
improvement. The names 'Apsu' and 'Tiamat' can be translated 'abyss', 'void' or 'bottomless gulf'. They share the shapeless
inertia of the original formlessness and had not yet achieved a clear identity.

Consequently, a succession of other gods emerged from them in a process known as emanation, which would become very
important in the history of our own God. The new gods emerged, one from the other, in pairs, each of which had acquired a
greater definition than the last as the divine evolution progressed. First came Lahmu and Lahann (their names mean 'silt':
water and earth are still mixed together). Next came Ansher and Kishar, identified respectively with the horizons of sky and
sea. Then Anu (the heavens) and Ea (the earth) arrived and seemed to complete the process. The divine world had sky,
rivers and earth, distinct and separate from one another. But creation had only just begun: the forces of chaos and
disintegration could only be held at bay by means of a painful and incessant struggle. The younger, dynamic gods rose up
against their parents but even though Ea was able to overpower Apsu and Mummu, he could make no headway against
Tiamat, who produced a whole brood of misshapen monsters to fight on her behalf. Fortunately Ea had a wonderful child of
his own: Marduk, the Sun God, the most perfect specimen of the divine line. At a meeting of the Great Assembly of gods,
Marduk promised to fight Tiamat on condition that he became their ruler. Yet he only managed to slay Tiamat with great
difficulty and after a long, dangerous battle. In this myth, creativity is a struggle, achieved laboriously against overwhelming
odds.

Eventually, however, Marduk stood over Tiamat's vast corpse and decided to create a new world: he split her body in two
to form the arch of the sky and the world of men; next he devised the laws that would keep everything in its appointed
place. Order must be achieved. Yet the victory was not complete. It had to be re-established, by means of a special liturgy,
year after year. Consequently the gods met at Babylon, the centre of the new earth, and built a temple where the celestial
rites could be performed. The result was the great ziggurat in honour of Marduk, 'the earthly temple, symbol of infinite
heaven'. When it was completed, Marduk took his seat at the summit and the gods cried aloud: 'This is Babylon, dear city
of the god, your beloved home!' Then they performed the liturgy 'from which the universe receives its structure, the hidden
world is made plain and the gods assigned their places in the universe'. {3} These laws and rituals are binding upon
everybody; even the gods must observe them to ensure the survival of creation. The myth expresses the inner meaning of
civilisation, as the Babylonians saw it. They knew perfectly well that their own ancestors had built the ziggurat but the story of the Enuma Elish articulated their belief that their creative enterprise could only endure if it partook of the power of the divine. The liturgy they celebrated at the New Year had been devised before human beings had come into existence: it was written into the very nature of things to which even the gods had to submit. The myth also expressed their conviction that Babylon was a sacred place, the centre of the world and the home of the gods - a notion that was crucial in almost all the religious systems of antiquity. The idea of a holy city, where men and women felt that they were closely in touch with sacred power, the source of all being and efficacy, would be important in all three of the monotheistic religions of our own God.

Finally, almost as an afterthought, Marduk created humanity. He seized Kingu (the oafish consort of Tiamat, created by her after the defeat of Apsu), slew him and shaped the first man by mixing the divine blood with the dust. The gods watched in astonishment and admiration. There is, however, some humour in this mythical account of the origin of humanity, which is by no means the pinnacle of creation but derives from one of the most stupid and ineffectual of the gods. But the story made another important point. The first man had been created from the substance of a god: he therefore shared the divine nature, in however limited a way. There was no gulf between human beings and the gods. The natural world, men and women and the gods themselves all shared the same nature and derived from the same divine substance. The pagan vision was holistic. The gods were not shut off from the human race in a separate, ontological sphere: divinity was not essentially different from humanity. There was thus no need for a special revelation of the gods or for a divine law to descend to earth from on high. The gods and human beings shared the same predicament, the only difference being that the gods were more powerful and were immortal.

This holistic vision was not confined to the Middle East but was common in the ancient world. In the sixth century BCE, Pindar expressed the Greek version of this belief in his ode on the Olympic games:

Single is the race, single
Of men and gods;
From a single mother we both draw breath.
But a difference of power in everything
Keeps us apart;
For one is as nothing, but the brazen sky
Stays a fixed habituation for ever.
Yet we can in greatness of mind
Or of body be like the Immortals. {4}

Instead of seeing his athletes as on their own, each striving to achieve his personal best, Pindar sets them against the exploits of the gods, who were the pattern for all human achievement. Men were not slavishly imitating the gods as hopelessly distant beings but living up to the potential of their own essentially divine nature.

The myth of Marduk and Tiamat seems to have influenced the people of Canaan, who told a very similar story about Baal-Habad, the god of storm and fertility, who is often mentioned in extremely unflattering terms in the Bible. The story of Baal's battle with Yam-Nahar, the god of the seas and rivers, is told on tablets that date back to the fourteenth century BCE. Baal and Yam both lived with El, the Canaanite High God. At the Council of El, Yam demands that Baal be delivered up to him. With two magic weapons, Baal defeats Yam and is about to kill him when Asherah (El's wife and mother of the gods) pleads that it is dishonourable to slay a prisoner. Baal is ashamed and spares Yam, who represents the hostile aspect of the seas and rivers which constantly threaten to flood the earth, while Baal, the Storm God, makes the earth fertile. In another version of the myth, Baal slays the seven-headed dragon Lotan, who is called Leviathan in Hebrew. In almost all cultures, the dragon symbolises the latent, the unformed and the undifferentiated. Baal has thus halted the slide back to primal formlessness in a truly creative act and is rewarded by a beautiful palace built by the gods in his honour. In very early religion, therefore, creativity was seen as divine: we still use religious language to speak of creative 'inspiration' which shapes reality anew and brings fresh meaning to the world.

But Baal undergoes a reverse: he dies and has to descend to the world of Mot, the god of death and sterility. When he hears of his son's fate, the High God El comes down from his throne, puts on sackcloth and gashes his cheeks but he cannot redeem his son. It is Anat, Baal's lover and sister, who leaves the divine realm and goes in search of her twin soul, 'desiring him as a cow her calf or a ewe her lamb'. {5} When she finds his body, she makes a funeral feast in his honour, seizes Mot, cleaves him with her sword, winnows, burns and grinds him like corn before sowing him in the ground. Similar stories are told about the other great goddesses - Inana, Ishtar and Isis - who search for the dead god and bring new life to the soil. The victory of Anat, however, must be perpetuated year after year in ritual celebration. Later - we are not sure how, since
our sources are incomplete - Baal is brought back to life and restored to Anat. This apotheosis of wholeness and harmony, symbolised by the union of the sexes, was celebrated by means of ritual sex in ancient Canaan. By imitating the gods in this way, men and women would share their struggle against sterility and ensure the creativity and fertility of the world. The death of a god, the quest of the goddess and the triumphant return to the divine sphere were constant religious themes in many cultures and would recur in the very different religion of the One God worshipped by Jews, Christians and Muslims.

This religion is attributed in the Bible to Abraham, who left Ur and eventually settled in Canaan some time between the twentieth and nineteenth centuries BCE. We have no contemporary record of Abraham but scholars think that he may have been one of the wandering chieftains who had led their people from Mesopotamia towards the Mediterranean at the end of the third millennium BCE. These wanderers, some of whom are called Abiru, Apiru or Habiru in Mesopotamian and Egyptian sources, spoke West Semitic languages, of which Hebrew is one. They were not regular desert nomads like the Bedouin, who migrated with their flocks according to the cycle of the seasons, but were more difficult to classify and, as such, were frequently in conflict with the conservative authorities. Their cultural status was usually superior to the desert folk. Some served as mercenaries, others became government employees, others worked as merchants, servants or tinkers. Some became rich and might then try to acquire land and settle down. The stories about Abraham in the book of Genesis show him serving the King of Sodom as a mercenary and describe his frequent conflicts with the authorities of Canaan and its environs. Eventually, when his wife Sarah died, Abraham bought land in Hebron, now on the West Bank.

The Genesis account of Abraham and his immediate descendants may indicate that there were three main waves of early Hebrew settlement in Canaan, the modern Israel. One was associated with Abraham and Hebron and took place in about 1850 BCE. A second wave of immigration was linked with Abraham's grandson Jacob, who was renamed Israel ('May God show his strength!'); he settled in Shechem, which is now the Arab town of Nablus on the West Bank. The Bible tells us that Jacob's sons, who became the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel, emigrated to Egypt during a severe famine in Canaan. The third wave of Hebrew settlement occurred in about 1200 BCE when tribes who claimed to be descendants of Abraham, arrived in Canaan from Egypt. They said that they had been enslaved by the Egyptians but had been liberated by a deity called Yahweh, who was the god of their leader Moses. After they had forced their way into Canaan, they allied themselves with the Hebrews there and became known as the people of Israel. The Bible makes it clear that the people we know as the ancient Israelites were a confederation of various ethnic groups, bound principally together by their loyalty to Yahweh, the God of Moses. The biblical account was written down centuries later, however, in about the eighth century BCE, though it certainly drew on earlier narrative sources. During the nineteenth century, some German biblical scholars developed a critical method which discerned four different sources in the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy.

These were later collated into the final text of what we know as the Pentateuch during the fifth century BCE. This form criticism has come in for a good deal of harsh treatment but nobody has yet come up with a more satisfactory theory, which explains why there are two quite different accounts of key biblical events, such as the Creation or the Flood, and why the Bible sometimes contradicts itself. The two earliest biblical authors, whose work is found in Genesis and Exodus, were probably writing during the eighth century, though some would give them an earlier date. One is known as 'J' because he calls his God 'Yahweh', the other 'E' since he prefers to use the more formal divine tide 'Elohim'. By the eighth century, the Israelites had divided Canaan into two separate kingdoms. J was writing in the southern Kingdom of Judah, while E came from the northern Kingdom of Israel. (See Map p.8). We will discuss the two other sources of the Pentateuch - the Deuteronomist (D) and Priestly (P) accounts of the ancient history of Israel - in Chapter Two.

We shall see that in many respects both J and E shared the religious perspectives of their neighbours in the Middle East but their accounts do show that by the eighth century BCE, the Israelites were beginning to develop a distinct vision of their own. J, for example, starts his history of God with an account of the creation of the world which, compared with the Enuma Elish, is startlingly perfunctory:

\[ \text{At the time when Yahweh God made earth and heaven, there was as yet no wild bush on the earth nor had any wild plant yet sprung up, for Yahweh God had not sent rain on the earth nor was there any man to till the soil. However, a flood was rising from the earth and watering all the surface of the soil. Yahweh God fashioned man (adam) of dust from the soil (adamah). Then he breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and thus man became a living being.} \text{[6]} \]

This was an entirely new departure. Instead of concentrating on the creation of the world and on the prehistoric period like his pagan contemporaries in Mesopotamia and Canaan, J is more interested in ordinary historical time. There would be no real interest in creation in Israel until the sixth century BCE, when the author whom we call 'P' wrote his majestic account in
what is now the first chapter of Genesis. J is not absolutely clear that Yahweh is the sole creator of heaven and earth. Most noticeable, however, is J's perception of a certain distinction between man and the divine. Instead of being composed of the same divine stuff as his god, man (adam), as the pun indicates, belongs to the earth (adamah).

Unlike his pagan neighbours, J does not dismiss mundane history as profane, feeble and insubstantial compared with the sacred, primordial time of the gods. He hurried through the events of prehistory until he comes to the end of the mythical period, which includes such stories as the Flood and the Tower of Babel, and arrives at the start of the history of the people of Israel. This begins abruptly in Chapter Twelve when the man Abram, who will later be renamed Abraham ('Father of a Multitude'), is commanded by Yahweh to leave his family in Haran, in what is now eastern Turkey, and migrate to Canaan near the Mediterranean Sea. We have been told that his father Terah, a pagan, had already migrated westward with his family from Ur. Now Yahweh tells Abraham that he has a special destiny: he will become the father of a mighty nation that will one day be more numerous than the stars in the sky and one day his descendants will possess the land of Canaan as their own. J's account of the call of Abraham sets the tone for the future history of this God. In the ancient Middle East, the divine mana was experienced in ritual and myth. Marduk, Baal and Anat were not expected to involve themselves in the ordinary, profane lives of their worshippers: their actions had been performed in sacred time. The God of Israel, however, made his power effective in current events in the real world. He was experienced as an imperative in the here and now. His first revelation of himself consists of a command: Abraham is to leave his people and travel to the land of Canaan.

But who is Yahweh? Did Abraham worship the same God as Moses or did he know him by a different name? This would be a matter of prime importance to us today but the Bible seems curiously vague on the subject and gives conflicting answers to this question. J says that men had worshipped Yahweh ever since the time of Adam's grandson but in the sixth century, 'P' seems to suggest that the Israelites had never heard of Yahweh until he appeared to Moses in the Burning Bush. P makes Yahweh explain that he really was the same God as the God of Abraham, as though this were a rather controversial notion: he tells Moses that Abraham had called him 'El Shaddai' and did not know the divine name Yahweh. {7} The discrepancy does not concern whether or not the biblical writers or their editors unduly. J calls his god 'Yahweh' throughout: by the time he was writing, Yahweh was the God of Israel and that was all that mattered. Israelite religion was pragmatic and less concerned with the kind of speculative detail that would worry us. Yet we should not assume that either Abraham or Moses believed in their God as we do today. We are so familiar with the Bible story and the subsequent history of Israel that we tend to project our knowledge of later Jewish religion back on to these early historical personages. Accordingly, we assume that the three patriarchs of Israel - Abraham, his son Isaac and grandson Jacob - were monotheists who believed in only one God. This does not seem to have been the case. Indeed, it is probably more accurate to call these early Hebrews pagans who shared many of the religious beliefs of their neighbours in Canaan. They would certainly have believed in the existence of such deities as Marduk, Baal and Anat. They may not all have worshipped the same deity: it is possible that the God of Abraham, the 'Fear' or 'Kinsman' of Isaac and the 'Mighty One' of Jacob were three separate gods. {8}

We can go further. It is highly likely that Abraham's God was El, the High God of Canaan. The deity introduces himself to Abraham as El Shaddai (El of the Mountain), which was one of El's traditional titles. {9} Elsewhere he is called El Elyon (The Most High God) or El of Bethel. The name of the Canaanite High God is preserved in such Hebrew names as Isa-El or Ishma-El. They experienced him in ways that would not have been unfamiliar to the pagans of the Middle East. We shall see that centuries later Israelites found the mana or 'holiness' of Yahweh a terrifying experience. On Mount Sinai, for example, he would appear to Moses in the midst of an awe-inspiring volcanic eruption and the Israelites had to keep their distance. In comparison, Abraham's god El is a very mild deity. He appears to Abraham as a friend and sometimes even assumes human form. This type of divine apparition, known as an epiphany, was quite common in the pagan world of antiquity. Even though in general the gods were not expected to intervene directly in the lives of mortal men and women, certain privileged individuals in mythical times had encountered their gods face to face. The Iliad is full of such epiphanies. The gods and goddesses appear to both Greeks and Trojans in dreams, when the boundary between the human and divine worlds was believed to be lowered. At the very end of the Iliad, Priam is guided to the Greek ships by a charming young man who finally reveals himself as Hermes. {10} When the Greeks looked back to the golden age of their heroes, they felt that they had been closely in touch with the gods, who were, after all, of the same nature as human beings. These stories of epiphanies expressed the holistic pagan vision: when the divine was not essentially distinct from either nature or humanity, it could be experienced without a great fanfare. The world was full of gods, who could be perceived unexpectedly at any time, around any corner or in the person of a passing stranger. It seems that ordinary folk may have believed that such divine encounters were possible in their own lives: this may explain the strange story in the Acts of the Apostles when, as late as the first century CE, the apostle Paul and his disciple Barnabas were mistaken for Zeus and Hermes by the people of Lystra in what is now Turkey."
In much the same way, when the Israelites looked back to their own golden age, they saw Abraham, Isaac and Jacob living on familiar terms with their god. El gives them friendly advice, like any sheikh or chieftain: he guides their wanderings, tells them whom to marry and speaks to them in dreams. Occasionally they seem to see him in human form - an idea that would later be anathema to the Israelites. In Chapter Eighteen of Genesis, J tells us that God appeared to Abraham by the oak tree of Mamre, near Hebron. Abraham had looked up and noticed three strangers approaching his tent during the hottest part of the day. With typical Middle Eastern courtesy, he insisted that they sit down and rest while he hurried to prepare food for them. In the course of conversation, it transpired, quite naturally, that one of these men was none other than his god, whom J always calls 'Yahweh'. The other two men turn out to be angels. Nobody seems particularly surprised by this revelation. By the time that J was writing in the eighth century BCE, no Israelite would have expected to 'see' God in this way: most would have found it a shocking notion. J's contemporary, 'E', finds the old stories about the patriarchs' intimacy with God unseemly: when E tells stories about Abraham's or Jacob's dealings with God, he prefers to distance the event and make the old legends less anthropomorphic. Thus he will say dial God speaks to Abraham through an angel. J, however, does not share this squeamishness and preserves the ancient flavour of these primitive epiphanies in his account.

Jacob also experienced a number of epiphanies. On one occasion, he had decided to return to Haran to find a wife among his relatives there. On the first leg of his journey, he slept at Luz near the Jordan valley, using a stone as a pillow. That night he dreamed of a ladder which stretched between earth and heaven: angels were going up and down between the realms of god and man. We cannot but be reminded of Marduk's ziggurat: on its summit, suspended as it were between heaven and earth, a man could meet his gods. At the top of his own ladder, Jacob dreamed that he saw El, who blessed him and repeated the promises that he had made to Abraham: Jacob's descendants would become a mighty nation and possess the land of Canaan. He also made a promise that made a significant impression on Jacob, as we shall see. Pagan religion was often territorial: a god only had jurisdiction in a particular area and it was always wise to worship the local deities when you went abroad. But El promised Jacob that he would protect him when he left Canaan and wandered in a strange land: 'I am with you; I will keep you safe wherever you go.' {12} The story of this early epiphany shows that the High God of Canaan was beginning to acquire a more universal implication.

When he woke up, Jacob realised that he had unwittingly spent the night in a holy place where men could have converse with their gods: 'Truly Yahweh is in this place, and I never knew it!' J makes him say. He was filled with the wonder that often inspired pagans when they encountered the sacred power of the divine: 'How awe-inspiring this place is! This is nothing less than a house of God (beth-El); this is the gate of heaven.' {3} He had instinctively expressed himself in the religious language of his time and culture: Babylon itself, the abode of the gods, was called 'Gate of the gods' (Bab-il). Jacob decided to consecrate this holy ground in the traditional pagan manner of the country. He took the stone he had used as a pillow, upended it and sanctified it with a libation of oil. Henceforth the place would no longer be called Luz but Beth-El, the House of El. Standing stones were a common feature of Canaanite fertility cults, which, we shall see, flourished at Beth-El until the eighth century BCE. Although later Israelites vigorously condemned this type of religion, the pagan sanctuary of Beth-El was associated in early legend with Jacob and his God.

Before he left Beth-El, Jacob had decided to make the god he had encountered there his elohim: this was a technical term, signifying everything that the gods could mean for men and women. Jacob had decided that if El (or Yahweh, as J calls him) could really look after him in Haran, he was particularly effective. He struck a bargain: in return for El's special protection, Jacob would make him his elohim, the only god who counted. Israelite belief in God was deeply pragmatic. Abraham and Jacob both put their faith in El because he worked for them: they did not sit down and prove that he existed; El was not a philosophical abstraction. In the ancient world, mana was a self-evident fact of life and a god proved his worth if he could transmit this effectively. This pragmatism would always be a factor in the history of God. People would continue to adopt a particular conception of the divine because it worked for them, not because it was scientifically or philosophically sound.

Years later Jacob returned from Haran with his wives and family. As he re-entered the land of Canaan, he experienced another strange epiphany. At the ford of Jabbok on the West Bank, he met a stranger who wrestled with him all night. At daybreak, like most spiritual beings, his opponent said that he had to leave but Jacob held on to him: he would not let him go until he had revealed his name. In the ancient world, knowing somebody's name gave you a certain power over him and the stranger seemed reluctant to reveal this piece of information. As the strange encounter developed, Jacob became aware that his opponent had been none other than El himself:

"Jacob then made this request, 'I beg you, tell me your name.' But he replied, 'Why do you ask my name?' and he blessed him there. Jacob named the place Peni-El [El's Face] 'Because I have seen El face to face,' he said, 'and I have survived.'" {4}
The spirit of this epiphany is closer to the spirit of the Iliad than to later Jewish monotheism, when such intimate contact with the divine would have seemed a blasphemous notion.

Yet even though these early tales show the patriarchs encountering their god in much the same way as their pagan contemporaries, they do introduce a new category of religious experience. Throughout the Bible, Abraham is called a man of 'faith'. Today we tend to define faith as an intellectual assent to a creed but, as we have seen, the biblical writers did not view faith in God as an abstract or metaphysical belief. When they praise the 'faith' of Abraham, they are not commending his orthodoxy (the acceptance of a correct theological opinion about God) but his trust, in rather the same way as when we say that we have faith in a person or an ideal. In the Bible, Abraham is a man of faith because he trusted that God would make good his promises, even though they seemed absurd. How could Abraham be the father of a great nation when his wife Sarah was barren? Indeed, the very idea that she could have a child was so ridiculous - eventually Sarah had passed the menopause - that when they heard this promise both Sarah and Abraham burst out laughing. When, against all the odds, their son is finally born, they call him Isaac, a name that may mean 'laughter'. The joke turns sour, however, when God makes an appalling demand: Abraham must sacrifice his only son to him.

Human sacrifice was common in the pagan world. It was cruel but had a logic and rationale. The first child was often believed to be the offspring of a god, who had impregnated the mother in an act of droit de seigneur. In begetting the child, the god's energy had been depleted, so to replenish this and to ensure the circulation of all the available mana, the first-born was returned to its divine parent. The case of Isaac was quite different, however. Isaac had been a gift of God but not his natural son. There was no reason for the sacrifice, no need to replenish the divine energy. Indeed, the sacrifice would make a nonsense of Abraham's entire life, which had been based on the promise that he would be the father of a great nation. This god was already beginning to be conceived differently from most other deities in the ancient world. He did not share the human predicament; he did not require an input of energy from men and women. He was in a different league and could make whatever demands he chose. Abraham decided to trust his god. He and Isaac set off on a three-day journey to the Mount of Moriah, which would later be the site of the Temple in Jerusalem. Isaac, who knew nothing of the divine command, even had to carry the wood for his own holocaust. It was not until the very last moment, when Abraham actually had the knife in his hand, that God relented and told him that it had only been a test. Abraham had proved himself worthy of becoming the father of a mighty nation, which would be as numerous as the stars in the sky or the grains of sand on the sea-shore.

Yet to modern ears, this is a horrible story: it depicts God as a despotic and capricious sadist and it is not surprising that many people today who have heard this tale as children reject such a deity. The myth of the Exodus from Egypt, when God led Moses and the children of Israel to freedom, is equally offensive to modern sensibilities. The story is well-known. Pharaoh was reluctant to let the people of Israel go, so to force his hand, God sent ten fearful plagues upon the people of Egypt. The Nile was turned to blood; the land ravaged with locusts and frogs; the whole country plunged into impenetrable darkness. Finally God unleashed the most terrible plague of all: he sent the Angel of Death to kill the first-born sons of all the Egyptians, while sparing the sons of the Hebrew slaves. Not surprisingly, Pharaoh decided to let the Israelites leave but later changed his mind and pursued them with his army. He caught up with them at the Sea of Reeds but God saved the Israelites by opening the sea and letting them cross dry-shod. When the Egyptians followed in their wake, he closed the waters and drowned the Pharaoh and his army.

This is a brutal, partial and murderous god: a god of war who would be known as Yahweh Sabaoth, the God of Armies. He is passionately partisan, has little compassion for anyone but his own favourites and is simply a tribal deity. If Yahweh had remained such a savage god, the sooner he vanished, the better it would have been for everybody. The final myth of the Exodus, as it has come down to us in the Bible, is Dearly not meant to be a literal version of events. It would, however, make an indelible impression on everybody involved. It would have been an extraordinary experience of the empowerment of the oppressed against the powerful and the mighty.

We shall see that Yahweh did not remain the cruel and violent god of the Exodus, even though the myth has been important in all three of the monotheistic religions. Surprising as it may seem, the Israelites would transform him beyond recognition into a symbol of transcendence and compassion. Yet the bloody story of the Exodus would continue to inspire dangerous
conceptions of the divine and a vengeful theology. We shall see that during the seventh century BCE, the Deuteronomist author (D) would use the old myth to illustrate the fearful theology of election, which has, at different times, played a fateful role in the history of all three faiths. Like any human idea, the notion of God can be exploited and abused. The myth of a Chosen People and a divine election has often inspired a narrow, tribal theology from the time of the Deuteronomist right up to the Jewish, Christian and Muslim fundamentalism that is unhappily rife in our own day. Yet the Deuteronomist has also preserved an interpretation of the Exodus myth that has been equally and more positively effective in the history of monotheism, which speaks of a God who is on the side of the impotent and the oppressed. In Deuteronomy Twenty-six, we have what may be an early interpretation of the Exodus story before it was written down in the narratives of J and E. The Israelites are commanded to present the first-fruits of the harvest to the priests of Yahweh and make this affirmation:

My father was a wandering Aramaean. He went down to Egypt to find refuge there, few in numbers; but there he became a nation, great, mighty and strong. The Egyptians ill-treated us, they gave us no peace and inflicted harsh slavery upon us. But we called on Yahweh the God of our fathers. Yahweh heard our voice and saw our misery, our toil and our oppression; and Yahweh brought us out of Egypt with mighty hand and outstretched arm, with great terror, and with signs and wonders. He brought us here [to Canaan] and gave us this land, a land where milk and honey flow. Here then I bring the first-fruits of the produce of the soil that you, Yahweh, have given me. {16}

The God who may have inspired the first successful peasants' uprising in history is a God of revolution. In all three faiths, he has inspired an ideal of social justice, even though it has to be said that Jews, Christians and Muslims have often failed to live up to this ideal and have transformed him into the God of the status quo.

The Israelites called Yahweh 'the God of our fathers' yet it seems that he may have been quite a different deity from El, the Canaanite High God worshipped by the patriarchs. He may have been the god of other people before he became the God of Israel. In all his early appearances to Moses, Yahweh insists repeatedly and at some length that he is indeed the God of Abraham, even though he had originally been called El Shaddai. This insistence may preserve the distant echoes of a very early debate about the identity of the God of Moses. It has been suggested that Yahweh was originally a warrior god, a god of volcanoes, a god worshipped in Midian, in what is now Jordan. {17} We shall never know where the Israelites discovered Yahweh, if indeed he really was a completely new deity. Again, this would be a very important question for us today but it was not so crucial for the biblical writers. In pagan antiquity, gods were often merged and amalgamated, or the gods of one locality accepted as identical with the god of another people. All we can be sure of is that, whatever his provenance, the events of the Exodus made Yahweh the definitive God of Israel and that Moses was able to convince the Israelites that he really was one and the same as El, the God beloved by Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The so-called 'Midianite Theory' - that Yahweh was originally a god of the people of Midian - is usually discredited today but it was in Midian that Moses had his first vision of Yahweh. It will be recalled that Moses had been forced to flee Egypt for killing an Egyptian who was ill-treating an Israelite slave. He had taken refuge in Midian, married there and it was while he was tending his father-in-law's sheep that he had seen a strange sight: a bush that burned without being consumed. When he went closer to investigate, Yahweh had called to him by name and Moses had cried: 'Here I am!' (hineni!), the response of every prophet of Israel when he encountered the God that demanded total attention and loyalty:

'Come no nearer' [God] said, 'Take off your shoes for the place on which you stand is holy ground. I am the god of your father,' he said, 'the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob.' At that Moses covered his face, afraid to look at God.' {8}

Despite the first of the assertions that Yahweh is indeed the God of Abraham, this is clearly a very different kind of deity from the one who had sat and shared a meal with Abraham as his friend. He inspires terror and insists upon distance. When Moses asks his name and credentials, Yahweh replies with a pun which, as we shall see, would exercise monotheists for centuries. Instead of revealing his name directly, he answers: 'I Am Who I Am (Ehyeh asher ehyeh).' {19} What did he mean? He certainly did not mean, as later philosophers would assert, that he was self-subsistent Being. Hebrew did not have such a metaphysical dimension at this stage and it would be nearly 2000 years before it acquired one. God seems to have meant something rather more direct. Ehyeh asher ehyeh is a Hebrew idiom to express a deliberate vagueness. When the Bible uses a phrase like: 'they went where they went', it means: 'I haven't the faintest idea where they went'. So when Moses asks who he is, God replies in effect: 'Never you mind who I am!' or 'Mind your own business!' There was to be no discussion of God's nature and certainly no attempt to manipulate him as pagans sometimes did when they recited the names of their gods. Yahweh is the Unconditioned One: I shall be that which I shall be. He will be exactly as he chooses and will make no guarantees. He simply promised that he would participate in the history of his people. The myth of the Exodus
would prove decisive: it was able to engender hope for the future, even in impossible circumstances.

There was a price to be paid for this new sense of empowerment. The old Sky Gods had been experienced as too remote from human concerns; the younger deities like Baal, Marduk and the Mother Goddesses had come close to mankind but Yahweh had opened the gulf between man and the divine world once again. This is graphically clear in the story of Mount Sinai. When they arrived at the mountain, the people were told to purify their garments and keep their distance. Moses had to warn the Israelites: 'Take care not to go up the mountain or touch the foot of it. Whoever touches the mountain will be put to death.' The people stood back from the mountain and Yahweh descended in fire and cloud:

Now at daybreak on the third day there were peals of thunder on the mountain and lightning flashes, a dense cloud, and a loud trumpet blast, and inside the camp all the people trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet God and they stood at the bottom of the mountain. The mountain of Sinai was entirely wrapped in smoke, because Yahweh had descended on it in the form of fire. Like smoke from a furnace, the smoke went up and the whole mountain shook violently. {20}

Moses alone went up to the summit and received the tablets of the Law. Instead of experiencing the principles of order, harmony and justice in the very nature of things, as in the pagan vision, the Law is now handed down from on high. The God of history can inspire a greater attention to the mundane world, which is the theatre of his operations, but there is also the potential for a profound alienation from it.

In the final text of Exodus, edited in the fifth century BCE, God is said to have made a covenant with Moses on Mount Sinai (an event which is supposed to have happened around 1200). There has been a scholarly debate about this: some critics believe that the covenant did not become important in Israel until the seventh century BCE. But whatever its date, the idea of the covenant tells us that the Israelites were not yet monotheists, since it only made sense in a polytheistic setting. The Israelites did not believe that Yahweh, the God of Sinai, was the only God but promised, in their covenant, that they would ignore all the other deities and worship him alone. It is very difficult to find a single monotheistic statement in the whole of the Pentateuch. Even the Ten Commandments delivered on Mount Sinai take the existence of other gods for granted: 'There shall be no strange gods for you before my face.' {21}

The worship of a single deity was an almost unprecedented step: the Egyptian pharaoh Akenaton had attempted to worship the Sun god and to ignore the other traditional deities of Egypt but his policies were immediately reversed by his successor. To ignore a potential source of mana seemed frankly foolhardy and the subsequent history of the Israelites shows that they were very reluctant to neglect the cult of the other gods. Yahweh had proved his expertise in war but he was not a fertility god. When they settled in Canaan, the Israelites turned instinctively to the cult of Baal, the Landlord of Canaan, who had made the crops grow from time immemorial. The prophets would urge the Israelites to remain true to the covenant but the majority would continue to worship Baal, Asherah and Anat in the traditional way. Indeed, the Bible tells us that while Moses was up on Mount Sinai, the rest of the people turned back to the older pagan religion of Canaan. They made a golden bull, the traditional effigy of El, and performed the ancient rites before it. The placing of this incident in stark juxtaposition to the awesome revelation on Mount Sinai may be an attempt by the final editors of the Pentateuch to indicate the bitterness of the division in Israel. Prophets like Moses preached the lofty religion of Yahweh but most of the people wanted the older rituals, with their holistic vision of unity between the gods, nature and mankind.

Yet the Israelites had promised to make Yahweh their only god after the Exodus and the prophets would remind them of this agreement in later years. They had promised to worship Yahweh alone as their elohim and, in return, he had promised that they would be his special people and enjoy his uniquely efficacious protection. Yahweh had warned them that if they broke this agreement, he would destroy them mercilessly. Yet the Israelites had entered into the covenant agreement, nonetheless. In the book of Joshua we find what may be an early text of the celebration of this covenant between Israel and its God. The covenant was a formal treaty that was frequently used in Middle Eastern politics to bind two parties together. It followed a set form. The text of the agreement would begin by introducing the King who was the most powerful partner and would then trace the history of the relations between the two parties to the present time. Finally, it stated the terms, conditions and penalties that would accrue if the covenant were neglected. Essential to the whole covenant-idea was the demand for absolute loyalty. In the fourteenth century covenant between the Hittite King Mursilis II and his vassal Duppi Tashed, the King made this demand: 'Do not turn to anyone else. Your fathers presented tribute in Egypt; you shall not do that... With my friend you shall be friend and with my enemy you shall be enemy.' The Bible tells us that when the Israelites had arrived in Canaan and joined up with their kinsfolk there, all the descendants of Abraham made a covenant with Yahweh. The ceremony was conducted by Moses's successor Joshua, who represented Yahweh. The agreement follows the traditional pattern. Yahweh was introduced; his dealings with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob recalled; then the events of the
The people had a choice between Yahweh and the traditional gods of Canaan. They did not hesitate. There was no other god like Yahweh; no other deity had ever been so effective on behalf of his worshippers. His powerful intervention in their affairs had demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that Yahweh was up to the job of being their elohim: they would worship him alone and cast away the other gods. Joshua warned them that Yahweh was exceedingly jealous. If they neglected the terms of the covenant, he would destroy them. The people stood firm: they chose Yahweh alone as their elohim. Then cast away the alien gods from among you!' Josuah cried, 'and give your hearts to Yahweh, the God of Israel!' {23}

The Bible shows that the people were not true to the covenant. They remembered it in times of war, when they needed Yahweh's skilled military protection, but when times were easy they worshipped Baal, Anat and Asherah in the old way. Although Yahweh's cult was fundamentally different in its historical bias, it often expressed itself in terms of the old paganism. When King Solomon built a Temple for Yahweh in Jerusalem, the city that his father David had captured from the Jebusites, it was similar to the Temples of the Canaanite gods. It consisted of three square areas, which culminated in the small, cube-shaped room known as the Holy of Holies which contained the Ark of the Covenant, the portable altar which the Israelites had with them during their years in the wilderness. Inside the Temple was a huge bronze basin, representing Yam, the primeval sea of Canaanite myth, and two forty-foot free-standing pillars, indicating the fertility cult of Asherah.

The Israelites continued to worship Yahweh in the ancient shrines which they had inherited from the Canaanites at Beth-El, Shiloh, Hebron, Bethlehem and Dan, where there were frequently pagan ceremonies. The Temple soon became special, however, even though, as we shall see, there were some remarkably unorthodox activities there too. The Israelites began to see the Temple as the replica of Yahweh's heavenly court. They had their own New Year Festival in the autumn, beginning with the scapegoat ceremony on the Day of Atonement, followed five days later by the harvest festival of the Feast of Tabernacles, which celebrated the beginning of the agricultural year. It has been suggested that some of the psalms celebrated the enthronement of Yahweh in his Temple on the Feast of Tabernacles, which, like the enthronement of Marduk, re-enacted his primal subjugation of chaos. {24} King Solomon himself was a great syncretist: he had many pagan wives, who worshipped their own gods, and had friendly dealings with his pagan neighbours.

There was always a danger that the cult of Yahweh would eventually be submerged by the popular paganism. This became particularly acute during the latter half of the ninth century. In 869 King Ahab had succeeded to the throne of the northern Kingdom of Israel. His wife Jezebel, daughter of the King of Tyre and Sidon in what is now Lebanon, was an ardent pagan, intent upon converting the country to the religion of Baal and Asherah. She imported priests of Baal, who quickly acquired a following among the northerners, who had been conquered by King David and were lukewarm Yahwists. Ahab remained true to Yahweh but did not try to curb Jezebel's proselytism. When a severe drought struck the land towards the end of his reign, however, a prophet named Eli-Jah ('Yahweh is my god!') began to wander through the land, clad in a hairy mantle and a leather loincloth, fulminating against the disloyalty to Yahweh. He summoned King Ahab and the people to a contest on Mount Carmel between Yahweh and Baal. There, in the presence of 450 prophets of Baal, he harangued the people: how long would they dither between the two deities? Then he called for two bulls, one for himself and one for the prophets of Baal, to be placed on two altars. They would call upon their gods and see which one sent down fire from heaven to consume the holocaust. 'Agreed!' cried the people. The prophets of Baal shouted his name for the whole morning, performing their hobbling dance round their altar, yelling and gashing themselves with swords and spears. But 'there was no voice, no answer'. Elijah jeered: 'Call louder!' he cried, 'for he is a god: he is preoccupied or he has gone on a journey; perhaps he is asleep and he will wake up.' Nothing happened: 'there was no voice, no answer, no attention given them.'

Then it was Elijah's turn. The people crowded round the altar of Yahweh while he dug a trench around it which he filled with water, to make it even more difficult to ignite. Then Elijah called upon Yahweh. Immediately, of course, fire fell from heaven and consumed the altar and the bull, licking up all the water in the trench. The people fell upon their faces: 'Yahweh is God,' they cried, 'Yahweh is God.' Elijah was not a generous victor. 'Seize the prophets of Baal!' he ordered. Not one was to be spared: he took them to a nearby valley and slaughtered the lot. {25} Paganism did not usually seek to impose itself on
other people - Jezebel is an interesting exception - since there was always room for another god in the pantheon alongside the others. These early mythical events show that from the first Yahwism demanded a violent repression and denial of other faiths, a phenomenon we shall examine in more detail in the next chapter. After the massacre, Elijah climbed up to the top of Mount Carmel and sat in prayer with his head between his knees, sending his servant from time to time to scan the horizon. Eventually he brought news of a small cloud - about the size of a man's hand - rising up from the sea and Elijah told him to go and warn King Ahab to hurry home before the rain stopped him. Almost as he spoke, the sky darkened with stormy clouds and the rain fell in torrents. In an ecstasy, Elijah tucked up his cloak and ran alongside Ahab's chariot. By sending rain, Yahweh had usurped the function of Baal, the Storm God, proving that he was just as effective in fertility as in war. Fearing a reaction against his massacre of the prophets, Elijah fled to the Sinai peninsula and took refuge on the mountain where God had revealed himself to Moses. There he experienced a theophany which manifested the new Yahwist spirituality. He was told to stand in the crevice of a rock to shield himself from the divine impact:

Then Yahweh himself went by. Thence came a mighty wind, so strong it tore the mountains and shattered the rocks before Yahweh. But Yahweh was not in the wind. After the wind came an earthquake. But Yahweh was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire. But Yahweh was not in the fire. And after the fire came the sound of a gentle breeze. And when Elijah heard this, he covered his face with a cloak. {26}

Unlike the pagan deities, Yahweh was not in any of the forces of nature but in a realm apart. He is experienced in the scarcely perceptible timbre of a tiny breeze in the paradox of a voiced silence. The story of Elijah contains the last mythical account of the past in the Jewish scriptures. Change was in the air throughout the Oikumene. The period 800-200 BCE has been termed the Axial Age. In all the main regions of the civilised world, people created new ideologies that have continued to be crucial and formative. The new religious systems reflected the changed economic and social conditions. For reasons that we do not entirely understand, all the chief civilisations developed along parallel lines, even when there was no commercial contact (as between China and the European area). There was a new prosperity that led to the rise of a merchant class. Power was shifting from king and priest, temple and palace, to the market place. The new wealth led to intellectual and cultural florescence and also to the development of the individual conscience. Inequality and exploitation became more apparent as the pace of change accelerated in the cities and people began to realise that their own behaviour could affect the fate of future generations. Each region developed a distinctive ideology to address these problems and concerns: Taoism and Confucianism in China, Hinduism and Buddhism in India and philosophical rationalism in Europe. The Middle East did not produce a uniform solution but in Iran and Israel, Zoroaster and the Hebrew prophets respectively evolved different versions of monotheism. Strange as it may seem, the idea of 'God', like the other great religious insights of the period, developed in a market economy in a spirit of aggressive capitalism.

I propose to look briefly at two of these new developments before proceeding in the next chapter to examine the reformed religion of Yahweh. The religious experience of India developed along similar lines but its different emphasis will illuminate the peculiar characteristics and problems of the Israelite notion of God. The rationalism of Plato and Aristotle is also important because Jews, Christians and Muslims all drew upon their ideas and tried to adapt them to their own religious experience, even though the Greek God was very different from their own.

In the seventeenth century BCE, Aryans from what is now Iran had invaded the Indus valley and subdued the indigenous population. They had imposed their religious ideas, which we find expressed in the collection of odes known as the Rig-Veda. There we find a multitude of gods, expressing many of the same values as the deities of the Middle East and which presented the forces of nature as instinct with power, life and personality. Yet there were signs that people were beginning to see that the various gods might simply be manifestations of one divine Absolute, that transcended them all. Like the Babylonians, the Aryans were quite aware that their myths were not factual accounts of reality but expressed a mystery that not even the gods themselves could explain adequately. When they tried to imagine how the gods and the world had evolved from primal chaos, they concluded that nobody - not even the gods - could understand the mystery of existence:

Who then knows whence it has arisen,
Whence this emanation hath arisen,
Whether God disposed it, or whether he did not, -
Only he who is its overseer in highest heaven knows.
Or perhaps he does not know! {27}

The religion of the Vedas did not attempt to explain the origins of life nor to give privileged answers to philosophical questions. Instead, it was designed to help people to come to terms with the wonder and terror of existence. It asked more questions than it answered, designed to hold the people in an attitude of reverent wonder.
By the eighth century BCE, when J and E were writing their chronicles, changes in the social and economic conditions of the Indian subcontinent meant that the old Vedic religion was no longer relevant. The ideas of the indigenous population that had been suppressed in the centuries following the Aryan invasions surfaced and led to a new religious hunger. The revived interest in karma, the notion that one's destiny is determined by one's own actions, made people unwilling to blame the gods for the irresponsible behaviour of human beings. Increasingly the gods were seen as symbols of a single transcendent Reality. Vedic religion had become preoccupied with the rituals of sacrifice but the revived interest in the old Indian practice of yoga (the 'yoking' of the powers of the mind by special disciplines of concentration) meant that people became dissatisfied with a religion that concentrated on externals. Sacrifice and liturgy were not enough: they wanted to discover the inner meaning of these rites. We shall note that the prophets of Israel felt the same dissatisfaction. In India, the gods were no longer seen as other beings who were external to their worshippers; instead men and women sought to achieve an inward realisation of truth.

The gods were no longer very important in India. Henceforth they would be superseded by the religious teacher, who would be considered higher than the gods. It was a remarkable assertion of the value of humanity and the desire to take control of destiny: it would be the great religious insight of the subcontinent. The new religions of Hinduism and Buddhism did not deny the existence of the gods nor did they forbid the people to worship them. In their view, such repression and denial would be damaging. Instead, Hindus and Buddhists sought new ways to transcend the gods, to go beyond them. During the eighth century, sages began to address these issues in the treatises called the Aranyakas and the Upanishads, known collectively as the Vedanta: the end of the Vedas. More and more Upanishads appeared until by the end of the fifth century BCE, there were about 200 of them. It is impossible to generalise about the religion we call Hinduism because it eschews systems and denies that one exclusive interpretation can be adequate. But the Upanishads did evolve a distinctive conception of godhood that transcends the gods but is found to be intimately present in all things.

In Vedic religion, people had experienced a holy power in the sacrificial ritual. They had called this sacred power Brahman. The priestly caste (known as Brahmanas) were also believed to possess this power. Since the ritual sacrifice was seen as the microcosm of the whole universe, Brahman gradually came to mean a power which sustains everything. The whole world was seen as the divine activity welling up from the mysterious being of Brahman, which was the inner meaning of all existence. The Upanishads encouraged people to cultivate a sense of Brahman in all things. It was a process of revelation in the literal meaning of the word: it was an unveiling of the hidden ground of all being. Everything that happens became a manifestation of Brahman: true insight lay in the perception of the unity behind the different phenomena. Some of the Upanishads saw Brahman as a personal power but others saw it as strictly impersonal. Brahman cannot be addressed as thou; it is a neutral term, so is neither he nor she; nor is it experienced as the will of a sovereign deity. Brahman does not speak to mankind. It cannot meet men and women; it transcends all such human activities. Nor does it respond to us in a personal way: sin does not 'offend' it and it cannot be said to 'love' us or be 'angry'. Thanking or praising it for creating the world would be entirely inappropriate.

This divine power would be utterly alien were it not for the fact that is also pervades, sustains and inspires us. The techniques of yoga had made people aware of an inner world. These disciplines of posture, breathing, diet and mental concentration have also been developed independently in other cultures, as we shall see, and seem to produce experience of enlightenment and illumination which have been interpreted differently but which seem natural to humanity. The Upanishads claimed that this experience of a new dimension of self was the same holy power that sustained the rest of the world. The eternal principle within each individual was called Atman: it was a new version of the old holistic vision of paganism, a rediscovery in new terms of the One Life within us and abroad which was essentially divine. The Chandoga Upanishad explains this in the parable of the salt. A young man called Sretaketu had studied the Vedas for twelve years and was rather full of himself. His father Uddalaka asks him a question which he was unable to answer, however, and then proceeds to teach him a lesson about the fundamental truth of which he was entirely ignorant. He told his son to put a piece of salt into water and report back to him the following morning. When his father asked him to produce the salt, Sretaketu could not find it because it had completely dissolved. Uddalaka proceeded to question him:

'Would you please sip it at this end? What is it like?' he said.
'Salt.'
'Sip it in the middle. What is it like?'
'Salt.'
'Sip it at the far end. What is it like?'
'Salt.'
'Throw it away and then come to me.'
He did as he was told but [that did not stop the salt from] remaining the same.

[His father] said to him: 'My dear child, it is true that you cannot perceive Being here, but it is equally true that it is here. This first essence - the whole universe has as its Self: That is the Real: That is the Self: that you are, Sretaketu!'

Thus even though we cannot see it, Brahman pervades the world and, as Atman, is found eternally within each one of us.

Atman prevented God from becoming an idol, an exterior Reality 'out there', a projection of our own fears and desires. God is not seen in Hinduism as a Being added on to the world as we know it, therefore, nor is it identical with the world. There was no way that we could fathom this out by reason. It is only 'revealed' to us by an experience (anubhara) which cannot be expressed in words or concepts. Brahman is 'What cannot be spoken in words, but that whereby words are spoken ... What cannot be thought with the mind, but that whereby the mind can think.' {29} It is impossible to speak to a God that is as immanent as this or to think about it, making it a mere object of thought. It is a Reality that can only be discerned in ecstasy in the original sense of going beyond the self: God

comes to the thought of those who know It beyond thought, not to those who imagine It can be attained by thought. It is unknown to the learned and known to the simple.

It is known in the ecstasy of an awakening that opens the door of life eternal. {30}

Like the gods, reason is not denied but transcended. The experience of Brahman or Atman cannot be explained rationally any more than a piece of music or a poem. Intelligence is necessary for the making of such a work of art and its appreciation but it offers an experience that goes beyond the purely logical or cerebral faculty. This will also be a constant theme in the history of God.

The ideal of personal transcendence was embodied in the Yogi, who would leave his family and abandon all social ties and responsibilities to seek enlightenment, putting himself in another realm of being. In about 538 BCE, a young man named Siddhartha Gautama also left his beautiful wife, his son, his luxurious home in Kapilavashtu, about 100 miles north of Benares, and became a mendicant ascetic. He had been appalled by the spectacle of suffering and wanted to discover the secret to end the pain of existence that he could see in everything around him. For six years, he sat at the feet of various Hindu gurus and undertook fearful penances but made no headway. The doctrines of the sages did not appeal to him and his mortifications had simply made him despair. It was not until he abandoned these methods completely and put himself into a trance one night that he gained enlightenment.

The whole cosmos rejoiced, the earth rocked, flowers fell from leaven, fragrant breezes blew and the gods in their various heavens rejoiced. Yet again, as in the pagan vision, the gods, nature and mankind were bound together in sympathy. There was a new hope of liberation from suffering and the attainment of nirvana, the end of pain. Gautama had become the Buddha, the Enlightened One. At first the demon Mara tempted him to stay where he was and enjoy his new-found bliss: it was no use trying to spread the word because nobody would believe him. But two of the gods of the traditional pantheon - Maha Brahma and Sakra, Lord of the devas - came to the Buddha and begged him to explain his method to the world. The Buddha agreed and for the next forty-five years he tramped all over India, preaching his message: in this world of suffering, only one thing was stable and firm. This was Dharma, the truth about right living, which alone could free us from pain.

This was nothing to do with God. The Buddha believed implicitly in the existence of the gods since they were a part of his cultural baggage but he did not believe them to be much use to mankind. They, too, were caught up in the realm of pain and flux; they had not helped him to achieve enlightenment; they were involved in the cycle of rebirth like all other beings and eventually they would disappear. Yet at crucial moments of his life - as when he made the decision to preach his message - he imagined the gods influencing him and playing an active role. The Buddha did not deny the gods, therefore, but believed that the ultimate Reality of nirvana was higher than the gods. When Buddhists experience bliss or a sense of transcendence in meditation, they do not believe that this results from contact with a supernatural being. Such states are natural to humanity; they can be attained by anybody who lives in the correct way and learns the techniques of yoga. Instead of relying on a god, therefore, the Buddha urged his disciples to save themselves.

When he met his first disciples at Benares after his enlightenment, the Buddha outlined his system which was based on one essential fact: all existence was dukkha. It consisted entirely of suffering; life was wholly awry. Things come and go in meaningless flux. Nothing has permanent significance. Religion starts with the perception that something is wrong. In pagan
antiquity it had led to the myth of a divine, archetypal world corresponding to our own which could impart its strength to humanity. The Buddha taught that it was possible to gain release from dukkha by living a life of compassion for all living beings, speaking and behaving gently, kindlly and accurately and refraining from anything like drugs or intoxicants that cloud the mind. The Buddha did not claim to have invented this system. He insisted that he had discovered it: 'I have seen an ancient path, an ancient Road, trodden by Buddhas of a bygone age.' {31} Like the laws of paganism, it was bound up with the essential structure of existence, inherent in the condition of life itself. It had objective reality not because it could be demonstrated by logical proof but because anybody who seriously tried to live that way would find that it worked. Effectiveness rather than philosophical or historical demonstration has always been the hallmark of a successful religion: for centuries Buddhists in many parts of the world have found that this lifestyle does yield a sense of transcendent meaning.

Karma bound men and women to an endless cycle of rebirth into a series of painful lives. But if they could reform their egotistic attitudes, they could change their destiny. The Buddha compared the process of rebirth to a flame which lights a lamp, from which a second lamp is lit, and so on until the flame is extinguished. If somebody is still aflame at death with a wrong attitude, he or she will simply light another lamp. But if the fire is put out, the cycle of suffering will cease and nirvana will be attained. 'Nirvana' literally means 'cooling off or 'going out'. It is not a merely negative state, however, but plays a role in Buddhist life that is analogous to God. As Edward Conze explains in Buddhism: its Essence and Development, Buddhists often use the same imagery as theists to describe nirvana, the ultimate reality:

\[
\text{we are told that Nirvana is permanent, stable, imperishable, immovable, ageless, deathless, unborn, and unbecome, that it is power, bliss and happiness, the secure refuge, the shelter and the place of unassailable security; that it is the real Truth and the supreme Reality; that it is the good, the supreme goal and the one and only consummation of our life, the eternal, hidden and incomprehensible Peace.} \quad \{32\}
\]

Some Buddhists might object to this comparison because they find the concept of 'God' too limiting to express their conception of ultimate reality. This is largely because theists use the word 'God' in a limited way to refer to a being who is not very different from us. Like the sages of the Upanishads, the Buddha insisted that nirvana could not be defined or discussed as though it were any other human reality.

Attaining nirvana is not like 'going to heaven' as Christians often understand it. The Buddha always refused to answer questions about nirvana or other ultimate matters because they were 'improper' or 'inappropriate'. We could not define nirvana because our words and concepts are tied to the world of sense and flux. Experience was the only reliable 'proof'. His disciples would know that nirvana existed simply because their practice of the good life would enable them to glimpse it.

\[
\text{There is, monks, an unborn, an unbecome, an unmade, uncompounded. If, monks, there were not there this unborn, unbecome, unmade, uncompounded, there would not here an escape from the born, the become, the made, the compounded. But because there is an unborn, an unbecome, an unmade, an uncompounded, therefore, there is an escape from the born, the become, the made, the compounded.} \quad \{33\}
\]

His monks should not speculate about the nature of nirvana. All that the Buddha could do was provide them with a raft to take them across to 'the farther shore'. When asked if a Buddha who had attained nirvana lived after death, he dismissed the question as 'improper'. It was like asking what direction a flame went when it 'went out'. It was equally wrong to say that a Buddha existed in nirvana as that he did not exist: the word 'exist' bore no relation to any state that we can understand. We shall find that over the centuries, Jews, Christians and Muslims have made the same reply to the question of the 'existence' of God. The Buddha was trying to show that language was not equipped to deal with a reality that lay beyond concepts and reason. Again, he did not deny reason but insisted on the importance of clear and accurate thinking and use of language. Ultimately, however, he held that the theology or beliefs that a person held, like the ritual he took part in, were unimportant. They could be interesting but not a matter of final significance. The only thing that counted was the good life; if it were attempted, Buddhists would find that the Dharma was true, even if they could not express this truth in logical terms.

The Greeks, on the other hand, were passionately interested in logic and reason. Plato (427-346 BCE) was continually occupied with problems of epistemology and the nature of wisdom. Much of his early work was devoted to the defence of Socrates, who had forced men to clarify their ideas by his thought-provoking questions but had been sentenced to death in 399 on the charges of impiety and the corruption of youth. In a way that was not dissimilar to that of the people of India, he had become dissatisfied with the old festivals and myths of religion, which he found demeaning and inappropriate. Plato had also been influenced by the sixth century philosopher Pythagoras, who may have been influenced by ideas from India, transmitted via Persia and Egypt. He had believed that the soul was a fallen, polluted deity incarcerated in the body as in a tomb and doomed to a perpetual cycle of rebirth. He had articulated the common human experience of feeling a stranger in a world that does not seem to be our true element. Pythagoras had taught that the soul could be liberated by means of ritual
purifications, which would enable it to achieve harmony with the ordered universe. Plato also believed in the existence of a divine, unchanging reality beyond the world of the senses, that the soul was a fallen divinity, out of its element, imprisoned in the body but capable of regaining its divine status by the purification of the reasoning powers of the mind. In the famous myth of the cave, Plato described the darkness and obscurity of man's life on earth: he perceives only shadows of the eternal realities flickering on the wall of the cave. But gradually he can be drawn out and achieve enlightenment and liberation by accustoming his mind to the divine light.

Later in his life, Plato may have retreated from his doctrine of the eternal forms or ideas but they became crucial to many monotheists when they tried to express their conception of God. These ideas were stable, constant realities which could be apprehended by the reasoning powers of the mind. They are fuller, more permanent and effective realities than the shifting, flawed material phenomena we encounter with our senses. The things of this world only echo, 'participate in' or 'imitate' the eternal forms in the divine realm. There is an idea corresponding to every general conception we have, such as Love, Justice and Beauty. The highest of all the forms, however, is the idea of the Good. Plato had cast the ancient myth of the archetypes into a Philosophical form. His eternal ideas can be seen as a rational version of the mythical divine world, of which mundane things are the merest shadow. He did not discuss the nature of God but confined himself to the divine world of the forms, though occasionally it seems that ideal Beauty or the Good do represent a supreme reality. Plato was convinced that the divine world was static and changeless. The Greeks saw movement and change as signs of inferior reality: something that had true identity remained always the same, characterised by permanence and immutability. The most perfect motion, therefore, was the circle because it was perpetually turning and returning to its original point: the circling of the celestial spheres imitate the divine world as best they can. This utterly static image of divinity would have an immense influence on Jews, Christians and Muslims, even though it had little in common with the God of revelation, who is constantly active, innovative and, in the Bible, even changes his mind, as when he repents of having made man and decides to destroy the human race in the Flood.

There was a mystical aspect of Plato which monotheists would find most congenial. Plato's divine forms were not realities 'out there' but could be discovered within the self. In his dramatic dialogue The Symposium, Plato showed how love of a beautiful body could be purified and transformed into an ecstatic contemplation (theoria) of ideal Beauty. He makes Diotima, Socrates's mentor, explain that this Beauty is unique, eternal and absolute, quite unlike anything that we experience in this world:

This Beauty is first of all eternal; it neither comes into being nor passes away; neither waxes nor wanes; next it is not beautiful in part and ugly in part, nor beautiful at one time and ugly at another, nor beautiful in this relation and ugly in that, nor beautiful here and ugly there, as varying according to its beholders; nor again will this beauty appear to the imagination like the beauty of a face or hands or anything else corporeal, or like the beauty of a thought or science, or like beauty which has its seat in something other than itself, be it in a living thing or the earth or the sky or anything else whatsoever; he will see it as absolute, existing alone within itself, unique, eternal. {34}

In short, an idea like Beauty has much in common with what many theists would call 'God'. Yet despite its transcendece, the ideas were to be found within the mind of man. We moderns experience thinking as an activity, as something that we do. Plato envisaged it as something which happens to the mind: the objects of thought were realities that were active in the intellect of the man who contemplates them. Like Socrates, he saw thought as a process of recollection, an apprehension of something that we had always known but had forgotten. Because human beings were fallen divinities, the forms of the divine world were within them and could be 'touched' by reason, which was not simply a rational or cerebral activity but an intuitive grasp of the eternal reality within us. This notion would greatly influence mystics in all three of the religions of historical monotheism.

Plato believed that the universe was essentially rational. This was another myth or imaginary conception of reality. Aristotle (384-322) took it a step further. He was the first to appreciate the importance of logical reasoning, the basis of all science, and was convinced that it was possible to arrive at an understanding of the universe by applying this method. As well as attempting a theoretical understanding of the truth in the fourteen treatises known as the Metaphysics (the term was coined by his editor, who put these treatises 'after the Physics': meta ta physika), he also studied theoretical physics and empirical biology. Yet he possessed profound intellectual humility, insisting that nobody was able to attain an adequate conception of truth but that everybody could make a small contribution to our collective understanding. There has been much controversy about his assessment of Plato's work. He seems to have been temperamentally opposed to Plato's transcendent view of the forms, rejecting the notion that they had a prior, independent existence. Aristotle maintained that the forms only had reality in so far as they existed in concrete, material objects in our own world.
Despite his earthbound approach and his preoccupation with scientific fact, Aristotle had an acute understanding of the nature and importance of religion and mythology. He pointed out that people who had become initiates in the various mystery religions were not required to learn any facts 'but to experience certain emotions and to be put in a certain disposition'. {35} Hence his famous literary theory that tragedy effected a purification (katharsis) of the emotions of terror and pity that amounted to an experience of rebirth. The Greek tragedies, which originally formed part of a religious festival, did not necessarily present a factual account of historical events but were attempting to reveal a more serious truth. Indeed, history was more trivial than poetry and myth: 'The one describes what has happened, the other what might. Hence poetry is something more philosophic and serious than history; for poetry speaks of what is universal, history of what is particular.'

There may or may not have been an historical Achilles or Oedipus but the facts of their lives were irrelevant to the characters we have experienced in Homer and Sophocles, which express a different but more profound truth about the human condition. Aristotle's account of the katharsis of tragedy was a philosophic presentation of a truth that Homo religiosus had always understood intuitively: a symbolic, mythical or ritual presentation of events that would be unendurable in daily life can redeem and transform them into something pure and even pleasurable.

Aristotle's idea of God had an immense influence on later monotheists, particularly on Christians in the Western world. In the Physics, he had examined the nature of reality and the structure and substance of the universe. He developed what amounted to a philosophical version of the old emanation accounts of creation: there was a hierarchy of existences, each one of which imparts form and change to the one below it, but unlike the old myths, in Aristotle's theory the emanations grew weaker the further they were from their source. At the top of this hierarchy was the Unmoved Mover, which Aristotle identified with God. This God was pure being and, as such, eternal, immobile and spiritual. God was pure thought, at one and the same time thinker and thought, engaged in an eternal moment of contemplation of himself, the highest object of knowledge. Since matter is flawed and mortal, there is no material element in God or the higher grades of being. The Unmoved Mover causes all the motion and activity in the universe, since each movement must have a cause that can be traced back to a single source. He activates the world by a process of attraction, since all beings are drawn towards Being itself.

Man is in a privileged position: his human soul has the divine gift of intellect, which makes him kin to God and a partaker in the divine nature. This godly capacity of reason puts him above plants and animals. As body and soul, however, man is a microcosm of the whole universe, containing within himself its basest materials as well as the divine attribute of reason. It is his duty to become immortal and divine by purifying his intellect. Wisdom (sophia) was the highest of all the human virtues; it was expressed in contemplation (theoria) of philosophical truth which, as in Plato, makes us divine by imitating the activity of God himself. Theoria was not achieved by logic alone but was a disciplined intuition resulting in an ecstatic self-transcendence. Very few people are capable of this wisdom, however, and most can achieve only phronesis, the exercise of foresight and intelligence in daily life.

Despite the important position of the Unmoved Mover in his system, Aristotle's God had little religious relevance. He had not created the world, since this would have involved an inappropriate change and temporal activity. Even though everything yearns towards him, this God remains quite indifferent to the existence of the universe, since he cannot contemplate anything inferior to himself. He certainly does not direct or guide the world and can make no difference to our lives, one way or the other. It is an open question whether God even knows of the existence of the cosmos, which has emanated from him as a necessary effect of his existence. The question of the existence of such a God must be entirely peripheral. Aristotle himself may have abandoned his theology later in life. As men of the Axial Age, he and Plato were both concerned with the individual conscience, the good life and the question of justice in society. Yet their thought was elitist. The pure world of Plato's forms or the remote God of Aristotle could make little impact on the lives of ordinary mortals, a fact which their later Jewish and Muslim admirers were forced to acknowledge.

In the new ideologies of the Axial Age, therefore, there was a general agreement that human life contained a transcendent element that was essential. The various sages we have considered interpreted this transcendence differently but they were united in seeing it as crucial to the development of men and women as full human beings. They had not jettisoned the older mythologies absolutely but reinterpreted them and helped people to rise above them. At the same time as these momentous ideologies were being formed, the prophets of Israel developed their own traditions to meet the changing conditions, with the result that Yahweh eventually became the only God. But how would irascible Yahweh measure up to these other lofty visions?

2 - One God
In 742 BCE, a member of the Judaean royal family had a vision of Yahweh in the Temple which King Solomon had built in Jerusalem. It was an anxious time for the people of Israel. King Uzziah of Judah had died that year and was succeeded by his son Ahaz, who would encourage his subjects to worship pagan gods alongside Yahweh. The northern kingdom of Israel was in a state of near anarchy: after the death of King Jeroboam II, five kings had sat on the throne between 746 and 736, while King Tiglath Pileser III, King of Assyria, looked hungrily at their lands which he was anxious to add to his expanding empire. In 722, his successor King Sargon II would conquer the northern Kingdom and deport the population: the ten northern tribes of Israel were forced to assimilate and disappeared from history, while the little kingdom of Judah feared for its own survival. As Isaiah prayed in the Temple shortly after King Uzziah's death, he was probably full of foreboding; at the same time he may have been uncomfortably aware of the inappropriateness of the lavish Temple ceremonial. Isaiah may have been a member of the ruling class but he had populist and democratic views and was highly sensitive to the plight of the poor. As the incense filled the sanctuary before the Holy of Holies and the place reeked with the blood of the sacrificial animals, he may have feared that the religion of Israel had lost its integrity and inner meaning.

Suddenly he seemed to see Yahweh himself sitting on his throne in heaven directly above the Temple, which was the replica of his celestial court on earth. Yahweh's train filled the sanctuary and he was attended by two seraphs, who covered their faces with their wings lest they look upon his face. They cried out to one another antiphonally: 'Holy! holy! holy is Yahweh Sabaoth. His glory fills the whole earth.' {1} At the sound of their voices, the whole Temple seemed to shake on its foundations and was filled with smoke, enveloping Yahweh in an impenetrable cloud, similar to the cloud and smoke that had hidden him from Moses on Mount Sinai. When we use the word 'holy' today, we usually refer to a state of moral excellence. The Hebrew kaddosh, however, was nothing to do with morality as such but means otherness, a radical separation. The apparition of Yahweh on Mount Sinai had emphasised the immense gulf that had suddenly yawned between man and the divine world. Now the seraphs were crying: 'Yahweh is other! other! other!' Isaiah had experienced that sense of the numinous which has periodically descended upon men and women and filled them with fascination and dread.

In his classic book The Idea of the Holy, Rudolf Otto described this fearful experience of transcendent reality as mysterium tremendum et fascinans: it is terrible because it comes as a profound shock that severs us from the consolations of normality and fascinates us because, paradoxically, it exerts an irresistible attraction. There is nothing rational about this overpowering experience, which Otto compares to that of music or the erotic: the emotions it engenders cannot adequately be expressed in words or concepts. Indeed, this sense of the Wholly Other cannot even be said to 'exist' because it has no place in our normal scheme of reality. {2} The new Yahweh of the Axial Age was still 'the god of the armies' (saboath) but was no longer a mere god of war. Nor was he simply a tribal deity, who was passionately biased in favour of Israel: his glory was no longer confined to the Promised Land but filled the whole earth.

Isaiah was no Buddha experiencing an enlightenment that brought tranquillity and bliss. He had not become the perfected teacher of men. Instead he was filled with mortal terror, crying aloud:

> What a wretched state I am in! I am lost,
> for I am a man of unclean lips
> and I live among a people of unclean lips,
> and my eyes have looked at the King, Yahweh Sabaoth. {3}

Overcome by the transcendent holiness of Yahweh, he was conscious only of his own inadequacy and ritual impurity. Unlike the Buddha or a Yogi, he had not prepared himself for this experience by a series of spiritual exercises. It had come upon him out of the blue and he was completely shaken by its devastating impact. One of the seraphs flew towards him with a live coal and purified his lips, so that they could utter the word of God. Many of the prophets were either unwilling to speak on God's behalf or unable to do so. When God had called Moses, prototype of all prophets, from the burning bush and commanded him to be his messenger to Pharaoh and the children of Israel, Moses had protested that he was 'not able to speak well'. {4} God had made allowances for this impediment and permitted his brother Aaron to speak in Moses's stead. This regular motif in the stories of prophetic vocations symbolises the difficulty of speaking God's word. The prophets were not eager to proclaim the divine message and were reluctant to undertake a mission of great strain and anguish. The transformation of Israel's God into a symbol of transcendent power would not be a calm, serene process but attended with pain and struggle.

Hindus would never have described Brahman as a great king because their God could not be described in such human terms. We must be careful not to interpret the story of Isaiah's vision too literally: it is an attempt to describe the indescribable and Isaiah reverts instinctively to the mythological traditions of his people to give his audience some idea of what had happened to him. The psalms often describe Yahweh enthroned in his temple as king, just as Baal, Marduk and
Dagon, {5} the gods of their neighbours, presided as monarchs in their rather similar temples. Beneath the mythological imagery, however, a quite distinctive conception of the ultimate reality was beginning to emerge in Israel: the experience with this God is an encounter with a person. Despite his terrifying otherness, Yahweh can speak and Isaiah can answer. Again, this would have been inconceivable to the sages of the Upanishads, since the idea of having a dialogue or meeting with Brahman-Atman would be inappropriately anthropomorphic.

Yahweh asked: 'Whom shall I send? Who will be our messenger?' and, like Moses before him, Isaiah immediately replied: 'Here I am! (hineni!) send me!' The point of this vision was not to enlighten the prophet but to give him a practical job to do. Primarily the prophet is one who stands in God's presence but this experience of transcendence results not in the imparting of knowledge - as in Buddhism - but in action. The prophet will not be characterised by mystical illumination but by obedience. As one might expect, the message is never easy. With typical Semitic paradox, Yahweh told Isaiah that the people would not accept it: he must not be dismayed when they reject God's words: 'Go and say to this people: "Hear and hear again, but do not understand; see and see again, but do not perceive."' {6} Seven hundred years later, Jesus would quote these words when people refused to hear his equally tough message. {7} Humankind cannot bear very much reality. The Israelites of Isaiah's day were on the brink of war and extinction and Yahweh had no cheerful message for them: their cities would be devastated, the countryside ravaged and the houses emptied of their inhabitants. Isaiah would live to see the destruction of the northern kingdom in 722 and the deportation of the ten tribes. In 701 Sennacherib would invade Judah with a vast Assyrian army, lay siege to forty-six of its cities and fortresses, impale the defending officers on poles, deport about 2000 people and imprison the Jewish king in Jerusalem 'like a bird in a cage'. {8} Isaiah had the thankless task of warning his people of these impending catastrophes:

There will be great emptiness in the country and, though a tenth of the people remain, it will be stripped like a terebinth of which, once felled, only the stock remains. {9}

It would not have been difficult for an astute political observer to foresee these catastrophes. What was chillingly original in Isaiah's message was his analysis of the situation. The old partisan God of Moses would have cast Assyria into the role of the enemy; the God of Isaiah saw Assyria as his instrument. It was not Sargon II and Sennacherib who would drive the Israelites into exile and devastate the country. It is 'Yahweh who drives the people out'. {10}

This was a constant theme in the message of the prophets of the Axial Age. The God of Israel had originally distinguished himself from the pagan deities by revealing himself in concrete current events not simply in mythology and liturgy. Now, the new prophets insisted, political catastrophe as well as victory revealed the God who was becoming the lord and master of history. He had all the nations in his pocket. Assyria would come to grief in its turn simply because its kings had not realised that they were only tools in the hand of a being greater than themselves. {11} Since Yahweh had foretold the ultimate destruction of Assyria, there was a distant hope for the future. But no Israelite would have wanted to hear that his own people had brought political destruction upon its own head by its short-sighted policies and exploitative behaviour. Nobody would have been happy to hear that Yahweh had masterminded the successful Assyrian campaigns of 722 and 701, just as he had captained the armies of Joshua, Gideon and King David. What did he think he was doing with the nation that was supposed to be his Chosen People? There was no wish-fulfilment in Isaiah's depiction of Yahweh. Instead of offering the people a panacea, Yahweh was being used to make people confront unwelcome reality. Instead of taking refuge in the old cultic observances which projected people back into mythical time, prophets like Isaiah were trying to make their fellow-countrymen look the actual events of history in the face and accept them as a terrifying dialogue with their God.

While the God of Moses had been triumphantal, the God of Isaiah was full of sorrow. The prophecy, as it has come down to us, begins with a lament that is highly unflattering to the people of the covenant: the ox and the ass know their owners, but 'Israel knows nothing, my people understand nothing'. {12} Yahweh was utterly revolted by the animal sacrifices in the Temple, sickened by the fat of calves, blood of bulls and goats and the reeking blood that smoked from the holocausts. He could not bear their festivals, New Year ceremonies and pilgrimages. {13} This would have shocked Isaiah's audience: in the Middle East these cultic celebrations were of the essence of religion. The pagan gods depended upon the ceremonies to renew their depleted energies; their prestige depended in part on the magnificence of their temples. Now Yahweh was actually saying that these things were utterly meaningless. Like other sages and philosophers in the Oikumene, Isaiah felt that exterior observance was not enough. Israelites must discover the inner meaning of their religion. Yahweh wanted compassion rather than sacrifice:

You may multiply your prayers,
I shall not listen.
Your hands are covered with blood,
wash, make yourselves clean.
Take your wrong-doing out of my sight.
Cease to do evil.
Learn to do good,
search for justice,
help the oppressed,
be just to the orphan,
plead for the widow. {14}

The prophets had discovered for themselves the overriding duty of compassion, which would become the hallmark of all the major religions formed in the Axial Age. The new ideologies that were developing in the Oikumene during this period all insisted that the test of authenticity was that religious experience be integrated successfully with daily life. It was no longer sufficient to combine the observance to the Temple and to the extra-temporal world of myth. After enlightenment, a man or woman must return to the market place and practise compassion for all living beings.

The social ideal of the prophets had been implicit in the cult of Yahweh since Sinai: the story of the Exodus had stressed that God was on the side of the weak and oppressed. The difference was that now Israelites themselves were castigated as oppressors. At the time of Isaiah's prophetic vision, two prophets were already preaching a similar message in the chaotic northern kingdom. The first was Amos who was no aristocrat like Isaiah but a shepherd who had originally lived in Tekoa in the southern kingdom. In about 752, Amos had also been overwhelmed by a sudden imperative that had swept him to the kingdom of Israel in the north. There he had burst into the ancient shrine of Beth-El and shattered the ceremonial there with a prophecy of doom. Amaziah, the priest of Beth-El, had tried to send him away. We can hear the superior voice of the establishment in his pompous rebuke to the uncouth herdsman. He naturally imagined that Amos belonged to one of the guilds of soothsayers, who wandered round in groups telling fortunes for a living. 'Go away, seer!' he said disdainfully. 'Get back to the land of Judah; earn your bread there, do your prophesying there. We want no more prophesying in Beth-El; this is the royal sanctuary, the national temple.' Unabashed, Amos drew himself to his full height and replied scornfully that he was no guild prophet but had a direct mandate from Yahweh: 'I was no prophet, neither did I belong to any of the brotherhoods of prophets. I was a shepherd and looking after sycamores: but it was Yahweh who took me from herding the flock and Yahweh who said: "Go, prophesy to my people Israel."' {IS} So the people of Beth-El did not want to hear Yahweh's message? Very well, he had another oracle for them: their wives would be forced on to the streets, their children slaughtered and they themselves would die in exile, far from the land of Israel.

It was of the essence of the prophet to be solitary. Like Amos he was on his own; he had broken with the rhythms and duties of his past. This was not something he had chosen but something that had happened to him. It seemed as though he had been jerked out of the normal patterns of consciousness and could no longer operate the usual controls. He was forced to prophesy, whether he wanted to or not. As Amos put it:

_The lion roars; who can help feeling afraid?
The Lord Yahweh speaks: who can refuse to prophesy? {16}_

Amos had not been absorbed like the Buddha into the selfless annihilation of nirvana but Yahweh had taken the place of his ego and snatched him into another world. Amos was the first of the prophets to emphasise the importance of social justice and compassion. Like the Buddha, he was acutely aware of the agony of suffering humanity. In Amos's oracles, Yahweh is speaking on behalf of the oppressed, giving voice to the voiceless, impotent suffering of the poor. In the very first line of his prophecy as it has come down to us, Yahweh is roaring with horror from his Temple in Jerusalem as he contemplated the misery in all the countries of the Near East, including Judah and Israel. The people of Israel are just as bad as the goyim, the Gentiles: they might be able to ignore the cruelty and oppression of the poor but Yahweh could not. He noted every instance of swindling, exploitation and breathtaking lack of compassion: 'Yahweh swears it by the pride of Jacob: "Never will I forget a single thing that you have done."' {7} Did they really have the temerity to look forward to the Day of the Lord, when Yahweh would exalt Israel and humiliate the goyim? They had a shock coming: 'What will this Day of Yahweh mean to you? It will mean darkness not light!' {18} They thought they were God's Chosen People? They had entirely misunderstood the nature of the covenant, which meant responsibility not privilege: 'Listen sons of Israel, to this oracle Yahweh speaks against you!' Amos cried, 'against the whole family I brought out of the land of Egypt:

_You alone, of all the families of the earth, have I acknowledged, therefore it is for your sins that I mean to punish you._ {19}

The covenant meant that all the people of Israel were God's elect and had, therefore, to be treated decently. God did not
simply intervene in history to glorify Israel but to secure social justice. This was his stake in history and, if need be, he would use the Assyrian army to enforce justice in his own land.

Not surprisingly, most Israelites declined the prophet's invitation to enter into a dialogue with Yahweh. They preferred a less demanding religion of cultic observance either in the Jerusalem Temple or in the old fertility cults of Canaan. This continues to be the case: the religion of compassion is only followed by a minority; most religious people are content with decorous worship in synagogue, church, temple and mosque. The ancient Canaanite religions were still flourishing in Israel. In the tenth century, King Jeroboam I had set up two cultic bulls at the sanctuaries of Dan and Beth-El. Two hundred years later, the Israelites were still taking part in fertility rites and sacred sex there, as we see in the oracles of the prophet Hosea, Amos's contemporary. [20] Some Israelites appear to have thought that Yahweh had a wife, like the other gods: archaeologists have recently unearthed inscriptions dedicated 'To Yahweh and his Asherah'. Hosea was particularly disturbed by the fact that Israel was breaking the terms of the covenant by worshipping other gods, such as Baal. Like all of the new prophets, he was concerned with the inner meaning of religion. As he makes Yahweh say: 'What I want is love (hesed) not sacrifice; knowledge of God (daath Elohim) not holocausts.' [21] He did not mean theological knowledge: the word daath comes from the Hebrew verb yada: to know, which has sexual connotations. Thus J says that Adam 'knew' his wife Eve. [22] In the Old Canaanite religion, Baal had married the soil and the people had celebrated this with ritual orgies but Hosea insisted that since the covenant, Yahweh had taken the place of Baal and had wedded the people of Israel. They had to understand that it was Yahweh not Baal who would bring fertility to the soil. [23] He was still wooing Israel like a lover, determined to lure her back from the Baals who had seduced her:

> When that day comes - it is Yahweh who speaks -
> she will call me, 'My husband,'
> no longer will she call me, 'My Baal.'
> I will take the names of the Baals off her lips,
> their names shall never be uttered again. [24]

Where Amos attacked social wickedness, Hosea dwelt on the lack of inwardness in Israelite religion: the 'knowledge' of God was related to 'hesed', implying an interior appropriation and attachment to Yahweh that must supersede exterior observance.

Hosea gives us a startling insight into the way the prophets were developing their image of God. At the very beginning of his career, Yahweh seemed to have issued a shocking command. He told Hosea to go off and marry a whore (esheth zeuunim) because the whole country had 'become nothing but a whore abandoning Yahweh'. [25] It appears, however, that God had not ordered Hosea to scour the streets for a prostitute: esheth zeuunim (literally, 'a wife of prostitution') meant either a woman with a promiscuous temperament or a sacred prostitute in a fertility cult. Given Hosea's preoccupation with fertility rituals, it seems likely that his wife Gomer had become one of the sacred personnel in the cult of Baal. His marriage was, therefore, an emblem of Yahweh's relationship with the faithless Israel. Hosea and Gomer had three children, which were given fateful, symbolic names. His eldest son was called Jezreel, after a famous battlefield, their daughter was Lo-Ruhamah (Unloved) and their younger son Lo-Ammi (Not-My-People). At his birth, Yahweh had annulled the covenant with Israel: 'You are not my people and I am not your God.' [26] We shall see that the prophets were often inspired to perform elaborate mimes to demonstrate the predication of their people but it appears that Hosea's marriage was not coldly planned from the beginning. The text makes it clear that Gomer did not become an esheth zeuunim until after their children had been born. It was only with hindsight that it seemed to Hosea that his marriage had been inspired by God. The loss of his wife had been a shattering experience, which gave Hosea an insight into the way Yahweh must feel when his people deserted him and went whoring after deities like Baal. At first Hosea was tempted to denounce Gomer and have nothing more to do with her: indeed, the law stipulated that a man must divorce an unfaithful wife. But Hosea still loved Gomer and eventually he went after her and bought her back from her new master. He saw his own desire to win Gomer back as a sign that Yahweh was willing to give Israel another chance.

When they attributed their own human feelings and experiences to Yahweh, the prophets were in an important sense creating a god in their own image. Isaiah, a member of the royal family, had seen Yahweh as a king. Amos had ascribed his own empathy with the suffering poor to Yahweh; Hosea saw Yahweh as a jilted husband, who still continued to feel a yearning tenderness for his wife. All religion must begin with some anthropomorphism. A deity which is utterly remote from humanity, such as Aristotle's Unmoved Mover, cannot inspire a spiritual quest. As long as this projection does not become an end in itself, it can be useful and beneficial. It has to be said that this imaginative portrayal of God in human terms has inspired a social concern that has not been present in Hinduism. All three of the God-religions have shared the egalitarian and socialist ethic of Amos and Isaiah. The Jews would be the first people in the ancient world to establish a welfare system...
that was the admiration of their pagan neighbours.

Like all the other prophets, Hosea was haunted by the horror of idolatry. He contemplated the divine vengeance that the northern tribes would bring upon themselves by worshipping gods that they had actually made themselves:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{And now they add sin to sin,} \\
\text{they smelt images from their silver,} \\
\text{idols of their own manufacture,} \\
\text{smith's work, all of it.} \\
'Sacrifice to them,' they say. \\
\text{Men blow kisses to calves!} \{27\}
\end{align*}
\]

This was, of course, a most unfair and reductive description of Canaanite religion. The people of Canaan and Babylon had never believed that their effigies of the gods were themselves divine; they had never bowed down to worship a statue tout court. The effigy had been a symbol of divinity. Like their myths about the unimaginable primordial events, it had been devised to direct the attention of the worshipper beyond itself. The statue of Marduk in the Temple of Esagila and the standing stones of Asherah in Canaan had never been seen as identical with the gods but had been a focus that had helped people to concentrate on the transcendent element of human life. Yet the prophets frequently jeered at the deities of their pagan neighbours with a most unattractive contempt. These home-made gods, in their view, are nothing but gold and silver; they have been knocked together by a craftsman in a couple of hours; they have eyes that do not see, ears that do not hear; they cannot walk and have to be carted about by their worshippers; they are brutish and stupid subhuman beings that are no better than scarecrows in a melon patch. Compared with Yahweh, the Elohim of Israel, they are elilim, Nothings. The goyim who worship them are fools and Yahweh hates them. {28}

Today we have become so familiar with the intolerance that has unfortunately been a characteristic of monotheism, that we may not appreciate that this hostility towards other gods was a new religious attitude. Paganism was an essentially tolerant faith: provided that old cults were not threatened by the arrival of a new deity, there was always room for another god alongside the traditional pantheon. Even where the new ideologies of the Axial Age were replacing the old veneration of the gods, there was no such vitriolic rejection of the ancient deities. We have seen that in Hinduism and Buddhism people were encouraged to go beyond the gods rather than to turn upon them with loathing. Yet the prophets of Israel were unable to take this calmer view of the deities they saw as Yahweh's rivals. In the Jewish scriptures, the new sin of 'idolatry', the worship of 'false' gods, inspires something akin to nausea. It is a reaction that is, perhaps, similar to the revulsion that some of the Fathers of the Church would feel for sexuality. As such, it is not a rational, considered reaction but expressive of deep anxiety and repression. Were the prophets harbouring a buried worry about their own religious behaviour? Were they, perhaps, uneasily aware that their own conception of Yahweh was similar to the idolatry of the pagans, since they too were creating a god in their own image?

The comparison with the Christian attitude towards sexuality is illuminating in another way. At this point, most Israelites believed implicitly in the existence of the pagan deities. It is true that Yahweh was gradually taking over some of the functions of the elohim of the Canaanites in certain circles: Hosea, for example, was trying to argue that he was a better fertility god than Baal. But it was obviously difficult for the irredeemably masculine Yahweh to usurp the function of a goddess like Asherah, Ishtar or Anat who still had a great following among the Israelites, particularly among the women. Even though monotheists would insist that their God transcended gender, he would remain essentially male, though we shall see that some would try to remedy this imbalance. In part, this was due to his origins as a tribal god of war. Yet his battle with the goddesses reflects a less positive characteristic of the Axial Age, which generally saw a decline in the status of women and the female. It seems that in more primitive societies, women were sometimes held in higher esteem than men.

The prestige of the great goddesses in traditional religion reflects the veneration of the female. The rise of the cities, however, meant that the more masculine qualities of martial, physical strength were exalted over female characteristics. Henceforth women were marginalised and became second-class citizens in the new civilisations of the Oikumene. Their position was particularly poor in Greece, for example - a fact that Western people should remember when they decry the patriarchal attitudes of the Orient. The democratic ideal did not extend to the women of Athens, who lived in seclusion and were despised as inferior beings. Israelite society was also becoming more masculine in tone. In the early days, women were forceful and clearly saw themselves as the equal of their husbands. Some, like Deborah, had led armies into battle. Israelites would continue to celebrate such heroic women as Judith and Esther but after Yahweh had successfully vanquished the other gods and goddesses of Canaan and the Middle East and become the only God, his religion would be managed almost entirely by men. The cult of the goddesses would be superseded and this would be a symptom of a cultural
change that was characteristic of the newly-civilised world.

We shall see that Yahweh's victory was hard-won. It involved strain, violence and confrontation and suggests that the new religion of the One God was not coming as easily to the Israelites as Buddhism or Hinduism to the people of the subcontinent. Yahweh did not seem able to transcend the older deities in a peaceful natural manner. He had to fight it out. Thus in Psalm Eighty-two we see him making a play for the leadership of the Divine Assembly, which had played such an important role in both Babylonian and Canaanite myth:

Yahweh takes his stand in the Council of El
to deliver judgments among the gods. \{29\}

'No more mockery of justice
no more favouring the wicked!
Let the weak and the orphan have justice,
be fair to the wretched and the destitute,
rescue the weak and needy,
save them from the clutches of the wicked'

Ignorant and senseless, they carry on blindly,
undermining the very basis of human society.
I once said, 'You too are gods,
sons of El Elyon, all of you';
but all the same, you shall die like men;
as one man, gods, you shall fall.

When he stands up to confront the Council over which El has presided from time immemorial, Yahweh accuses the other gods of failing to meet the social challenge of the day. He represents the modern compassionate ethos of the prophets but his divine colleagues have done nothing to promote justice and equity over the years. In the old days, Yahweh had been prepared to accept them as elohim, the sons of El Elyon \{30\} but now the gods had proved that they were obsolete. They would wither away like mortal men. Not only did the psalmist depict Yahweh condemning his fellow gods to death but in doing so he had usurped the traditional prerogative of El, who, it would seem, still had his champions in Israel.

Despite the bad press it has in the Bible, there is nothing wrong with idolatry per se: it only becomes objectionable or naive if the image of God, which has been constructed with such loving care, is confused with the ineffable reality to which it refers. We shall see that later in the history of God, some Jews, Christians and Muslims worked on this early image of the absolute reality and arrived at a conception that was closer to the Hindu or Buddhist visions. Others, however, never quite managed to take this step but assumed that their conception of God was identical with the ultimate mystery. The dangers of an 'idolatrous' religiosity became clear in about 622 BCE during the reign of King Josiah of Judah. He was anxious to reverse the syncretist policies of his predecessors, King Manasseh (687-42) and King Amon (642-40) who had encouraged their people to worship the gods of Canaan alongside Yahweh. Manasseh had actually put up an effigy to Asherah in the Temple, where there was a flourishing fertility cult. Since most Israelites were devoted to Asherah and some thought that she was Yahweh's wife, only the most strict Yahwists would have considered this blasphemous. Determined to promote the cult of Yahweh, however, Josiah had decided to make extensive repairs in the Temple. While the workmen were turning everything upside down, the High Priest Hilkiah is said to have discovered an ancient manuscript which purported to be an account of Moses's last sermon to the children of Israel. He gave it to Josiah's secretary, Shapan, who read it aloud in the king's presence. When he heard it, the young king tore his garments in horror: no wonder Yahweh had been so angry with his ancestors! They had totally failed to obey his strict instructions to Moses. \{31\}

It is almost certain that the 'Book of the Law' discovered by Hilkiah was the core of the text that we now know as Deuteronomy. There have been various theories about its timely 'discovery' by the reforming party. Some have even suggested that it had been secretly written by Hilkiah and Shapan themselves with the assistance of the prophetess Huldah, whom Josiah immediately consulted. We shall never know for certain but the book certainly reflected an entirely new intransigence in Israel, which reflects a seventh century perspective. In his last sermon, Moses is made to give a new centrality to the covenant and the idea of the special election of Israel. Yahweh had marked his people out from all the other nations, not because of any merit of their own but because of his great love. In return, he demanded complete loyalty and a fierce rejection of all other gods. The core of Deuteronomy includes the declaration which would later become the Jewish profession of faith:
Listen (shema), Israel! Yahweh is our Elohim, Yahweh alone (ehad)! You shall love Yahweh with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength. Let these words I urge upon you today be written on your hearts. {32}

The election of God had set Israel apart from the goyim so, the author makes Moses say, when they arrive in the Promised Land they were to have no dealings whatever with the native inhabitants. They 'must make no covenant with them or show them any pity'. {33} There must be no inter-marriage and no social mixing. Above all, they were to wipe out the Canaanite religion: 'Tear down their altars, smash their standing stones, cut down their sacred poles and set fire to their idols,' Moses commands the Israelites, 'For you are a people consecrated to Yahweh your Elohim; it is you that Yahweh our Elohim has chosen to be his very own people out of all the peoples in the earth.' {34}

When they recite the Shema today, Jews give it a monotheistic interpretation: Yahweh our God is One and unique. The Deuteronomist had not yet reached this perspective. 'Yahweh ehad' did not mean God is One but that Yahweh was the only deity whom it was permitted to worship. Other gods were still a threat: their cults were attractive and could lure Israelites from Yahweh, who was a jealous God. If they obeyed Yahweh's laws, he would bless them and bring them prosperity but if they deserted him the consequences would be devastating:

You will be torn from the land which you are entering to make your own. Yahweh will scatter you among the peoples, from one end of the earth to the other; there you will serve other gods of wood and of stone that neither you nor your fathers have known ... Your life from the outset will be a burden to you ... In the morning you will say, 'how I wish it were evening!' and in the evening, 'how I wish it were morning!' such terror will grip your heart, such sights your eyes will see. {35}

When King Josiah and his subjects heard these words at the end of the seventh century, they were about to be confronted by a new political threat. They had managed to keep the Assyrians at bay and had thus avoided the fate of the ten northern tribes, who had endured the punishments described by Moses. But in 606 BCE, the Babylonian King Nebupolassar would crush the Assyrians and begin to build his own empire.

In this climate of extreme insecurity, the Deuteronomist's policies made a great impact. Far from obeying Yahweh's commands, the last two kings of Israel had deliberately courted disaster. Josiah instantly began a reform, acting with exemplary zeal. All the images, idols and fertility symbols were taken out of the Temple and burned. Josiah also pulled down the large effigy of Asherah and destroyed the apartments of the Temple prostitutes, who wove garments for her there. All the ancient shrines in the country, which had been enclaves of paganism, were destroyed. Henceforth the priests were only allowed to offer sacrifice to Yahweh in the purified Jerusalem Temple. The chronicler, who recorded Josiah's reforms nearly 300 years later, gives an eloquent description of this piety of denial and suppression:

Josiah looked on as the altars of the Baals were demolished; he tore down the altars of incense standing on them, he smashed the sacred poles and the carved and cast idols; he reduced them to dust, scattering it over the graves of those who had offered them sacrifices.

He burned the bones of their priests on their altars, and so purified Judah and Jerusalem; he did the same in the towns of Manasseh, Ephraim, Simeon, and even Naphtali, and in the ravaged districts around them. He demolished the altars and the sacred poles, smashed the idols and ground them to powder, and tore down all the altars of incense throughout the land of Israel. {36}

We are far from the Buddha's serene acceptance of the deities he believed he had outgrown. This wholesale destruction springs from a hatred that is rooted in buried anxiety and fear.

The reformers rewrote Israelite history. The historical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings were revised according to the new ideology and, later, the editors of the Pentateuch added passages that gave a Deuteronomist interpretation of the Exodus myth to the older narratives of J and E. Yahweh was now the author of a holy war of extermination in Canaan. The Israelites are told that the native Canaanites must not live in their country, {37} a policy which Joshua is made to implement with unholy thoroughness:

Then Joshua came and wiped out the Anakim from the highlands, from Hebron, from Debir, from Anoth, from all the highlands of Judah and all the inhabitants of Israel; he delivered them and their towns over to the ban. No more Anakim were left in Israelite territory except at Gaza, Gath and Ashod. {38}

In fact we know nothing about the conquest of Canaan by Joshua and the Judges, though doubtless a good deal of blood was shed. Now, however, the bloodshed had been given a religious rationale. The dangers of such theologies of election,
which are not qualified by the transcendent perspective of an Isaiah, are clearly shown in the holy wars that have scarred the history of monotheism. Instead of making God a symbol to challenge our prejudice and force us to contemplate our own shortcomings, it can be used to endorse our egotistic hatred and make it absolute. It makes God behave exactly like us, as though he were simply another human being. Such a God is likely to be more attractive and popular than the God of Amos and Isaiah, who demands ruthless self-criticism.

The Jews have often been criticised for their belief that they are the Chosen People, but their critics have often been guilty of the same kind of denial that fuelled the diatribes against idolatry in biblical times. All three of the monotheistic faiths have developed similar theologies of election at different times in their history, sometimes with even more devastating results than those imagined in the book of Joshua. Western Christians have been particularly prone to the flatteringly belief that they are God's elect. During the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the crusaders justified their holy wars against Jews and Muslims by calling themselves the new Chosen People, who had taken up the vocation that the Jews had lost. Calvinist theologies of election have been largely instrumental in encouraging Americans to believe that they are God's own nation. As in Josiah's Kingdom of Judah, such a belief is likely to flourish at a time of political insecurity when people are haunted by the fear of their own destruction. It is for this reason, perhaps, that it has gained a new lease of life in the various forms of fundamentalism that are rife among Jews, Christians and Muslims at the time of writing. A personal God like Yahweh can be manipulated to shore up the beleaguered self in this way, as an impersonal deity like Brahman can not.

We should note that not all the Israelites subscribed to Deuteronomism in the years that led up to the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 587 BCE and the deportation of the Jews to Babylon. In 604, the year of Nebuchadnezzar's accession, the prophet Jeremiah revived the iconoclastic perspective of Isaiah which turned the triumphalist doctrine of the Chosen People on its head: God was using Babylon as his instrument to punish Israel and it was now Israel's turn to be 'put under a ban'. They would go into exile for seventy years. When King Jehoiakim heard this oracle, he snatched the scroll from the hands of the scribe, cut it in pieces and threw it on the fire. Fearing for his life, Jeremiah was forced to go into hiding.

Jeremiah's career shows the immense pain and effort involved in the forging of this more challenging image of God. He hated being a prophet and was profoundly distressed to have to condemn the people he loved. He was not a natural firebrand but a tender-hearted man. When the call had come to him, he cried out in protest: 'Ah, Lord Yahweh; look, I do not know how to speak: I am a child!' and Yahweh had to 'put out his hand' and touched his lips, putting his words on his mouth. The message that he had to articulate was ambiguous and contradictory: 'to tear up and to knock down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.' It demanded an agonising tension between irreconcilable extremes. Jeremiah experienced God as a pain that convulsed his limbs, broke his heart and made him stagger about like a drunk. The prophetic experience of the mysterium terrible et fascinans was at one and the same time rape and seduction:

Yahweh, you have seduced me and I am seduced,
You have raped me and I am overcome ...
I used to say, 'I will not think about him,
I will not speak his name any more.'
Then there seemed to be a fire burning in my heart,
imprisoned in my bones.
The effort to restrain it wearied me,
I could not bear it. {43}

God was pulling Jeremiah in two different directions: on the one hand, he felt a profound attraction towards Yahweh that had all the sweet surrender of a seduction but at other times he felt ravaged by a force that carried him along against his will.

Ever since Amos, the prophet had been a man on his own. Unlike the other areas of the Oikumene at this time, the Middle East did not adopt a broadly united religious ideology. The God of the prophets was forcing Israelites to sever themselves from the mythical consciousness of the Middle East and go in quite a different direction from the mainstream. In the agony of Jeremiah, we can see what an immense wrench and dislocation this involved. Israel was a tiny enclave of Yahwism surrounded by a pagan world and Yahweh was also rejected by many of the Israelites themselves. Even the Deuteronomist, whose image of God was less threatening, saw a meeting with Yahweh as an abrasive confrontation: he makes Moses explain to the Israelites, who are appalled by the prospect of unmediated contact with Yahweh, that God will send them a prophet in each generation to bear the brunt of the divine impact.

There was as yet nothing to compare with Atman, the immanent divine principle, in the cult of Yahweh. Yahweh was experienced as an external, transcendent reality. He needed to be humanised in some way to make him appear less alien.
The political situation was deteriorating: the Babylonians invaded Judah and carried the king and the first batch of Israelites off into exile; finally Jerusalem itself was besieged. As conditions got worse, Jeremiah continued the tradition of ascribing human emotions to Yahweh: he makes God lament his own homelessness, affliction and desolation; Yahweh feels as stunned, offended and abandoned as his people; like them he seems bemused, alienated and paralysed. The anger that Jeremiah feels welling up in his own heart is not his own but the wrath of Yahweh. {45} When the prophets thought about 'man', they automatically also thought 'God', whose presence in the world seems inextricably bound up with his people. Indeed, God is dependent upon man when he wants to act in the world - an idea that would become very important in the Jewish conception of the divine. There are even hints that human beings can discern the activity of God in their own emotions and experiences, that Yahweh is part of the human condition.

As long as the enemy stood at the gate, Jeremiah raged at his people in God's name (though, before God, he pleaded on their behalf). Once Jerusalem had been conquered by the Babylonians in 587, the oracles from Yahweh became more comforting: he promised to save his people, now that they had learned their lesson, and bring them home. Jeremiah had been allowed by the Babylonian authorities to stay behind in Judah and to express his confidence in the future, he bought some real estate: Tor Yahweh Sabaoth says this: "People will buy fields and vineyards in this land again." ° {46} Not surprisingly, some people blamed Yahweh for the catastrophe. During a visit to Egypt, Jeremiah encountered a group of Jews who had fled to the Delta area and had no time at all for Yahweh. Their women claimed that everything had been fine as long as they had performed the traditional rites in honour of Ishtar, Queen of Heaven, but as soon as they stopped them, at the behest of the likes of Jeremiah, disaster, defeat and penury had followed. Yet the tragedy seemed to deepen Jeremiah's own insight. {47} After the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple, he began to realise that such external trappings of religion were simply symbols of an internal, subjective state. In the future, the covenant with Israel would be quite different: 'Deep within them I will plant my Law, writing it in their hearts ...' ° {48}

Those who had gone into exile were not forced to assimilate, as the ten northern tribes had been in 722. They lived in two communities: one in Babylon itself and the other on the banks of a canal leading from the Euphrates called the Chebar, not far from Nippur and Ur, in an area which they named Tel Aviv (Springtime Hill). Among the first batch of exiles to be deported in 597 had been a priest called Ezekiel. For about five years he stayed alone in his house and did not speak to a soul. Then he had a shattering vision of Yahweh, which literally knocked him out. It is important to describe his first vision in some detail because - centuries later - it would become very important to Jewish mystics, as we shall see in Chapter Seven. Ezekiel had seen a cloud of light, shot through with lightning. A strong wind blew from the north. In the midst of this stormy obscurity, he seemed to see - he is careful to emphasise the provisional nature of the imagery - a great chariot pulled by four strong beasts. They were similar to the karibu carved on the palace gates in Babylon yet Ezekiel makes it almost impossible to visualise them: each one had four heads: with the face of a man, a lion, a bull and an eagle. Each one of the wheels rolled in a different direction from the others. The imagery simply served to emphasise the alien impact of the visions that he was struggling to articulate. The beating of the creatures' wings was deafening; it 'sounded like rushing water, like the voice of Shaddai, a voice like a storm, like the noise of a camp'. On the chariot there was something that was 'like' a throne and, sitting in state, was a 'being that looked like a man'; it shone like brass, fire shooting from its limbs. It was also 'something that looked like the glory (kavod) of Yahweh'. ° {49} At once Ezekiel fell upon his face and heard a voice addressing him.

The voice called Ezekiel 'son of man' as if to emphasise the distance that now exists between humanity and the divine realm. Yet again, the vision of Yahweh is to be followed by a practical plan of action. Ezekiel was to speak the word of God to the rebellious sons of Israel. The ion-human quality of the divine message is conveyed by a violent image: a hand stretches at the behest of the likes of Jeremiah, disaster, defeat and penury had followed. Yet the tragedy seemed to deepen Jeremiah's own insight. {47} After the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple, he began to realise that such external trappings of religion were simply symbols of an internal, subjective state. In the future, the covenant with Israel would be quite different: 'Deep within them I will plant my Law, writing it in their hearts ...' ° {48}

Ezekiel's strange career emphasises how alien and foreign the divine world has become to humanity. He himself was forced to become a sign of this strangeness. Yahweh frequently commanded him to perform weird mimes, which set him apart from normal beings. They were also designed to demonstrate the plight of Israel during this crisis and, at a deeper level, showed that Israel was itself becoming an outsider in the pagan world. Thus, when his wife died, Ezekiel was forbidden to mourn; he had to lie on one side for 390 days and for forty on the other; once he had to pack his bags and walk around Tel Aviv like a refugee, with no abiding city. Yahweh afflicted him with such acute anxiety that he could not stop trembling and moving about restlessly. On another occasion, he was forced to eat excrement, as a sign of the starvation that his fellow-countrymen would have to endure during the siege of Jerusalem. Ezekiel had become an icon of the radical discontinuity that the cult of Yahweh involved: nothing could be taken for granted and normal responses were denied.
The pagan vision, on the other hand, had celebrated the continuity that was felt to exist between the gods and the natural world. Ezekiel found nothing consoling about the old religion, which he habitually called 'filth'. During one of his visions, he was conducted on a guided tour of the Temple in Jerusalem. To his horror he saw that, poised as they were on the brink of destruction, the people of Judah were still worshipping pagan gods in the Temple of Yahweh. The Temple itself had become a nightmarish place: the walls of its rooms were painted with writhing snakes and repulsive animals; the priests performing the 'filthy' rites were presented in a sordid light, almost as if they were engaged in back-room sex: 'Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the throne of Israel do in the dark, each in his painted room?' {51} In another room, women sat weeping for the suffering god Tammuz.

Others worshipped the sun, with their backs towards the sanctuary. Finally, the prophet watched the strange chariot he had seen in his first vision fly away, taking the 'glory' of Yahweh with it. Yet Yahweh is not an entirely distant deity. In the final days before the destruction of Jerusalem, Ezekiel depicts him fulminating against the people of Israel in a vain attempt to catch their attention and force them to acknowledge him. Israel has only itself to blame for the impending catastrophe. Alien as Yahweh frequently seemed, he was encouraging Israelites like Ezekiel to see that the blows of history were not random and arbitrary but had a deeper logic and justice. He was trying to find a meaning in the cruel world of international politics.

As they sat beside the rivers of Babylon, some of the exiles inevitably felt that they could not practise their religion outside the Promised Land. Pagan gods had always been territorial and for some it seemed impossible to sing the songs of Yahweh in a foreign country: they relished the prospect of hurling Babylonian babies against a rock and dashing their brains out. {52} A new prophet, however, preached tranquility. We know nothing about him and this may be significant because his oracles and psalms give no sign of a personal struggle, such as those endured by his predecessors. Because his work was later added to the oracles of Isaiah, he is usually called the Second Isaiah. In exile, some of the Jews would have gone over to the worship of the ancient gods of Babylon, but others were pushed into a new religious awareness. The Temple of Yahweh was in ruins; the old cultic shrines in Beth-El and Hebron destroyed. In Babylon they could not take part in the liturgies that had been central to their religious life at home. Yahweh was all they had. Second Isaiah took this one step further and declared that Yahweh was the only God. In his re-writing of Israelite history, the myth of the Exodus is clad in imagery that reminds us of the victory of Marduk over Tiamat, the primal sea:

\[
\text{And Yahweh will dry up the gulf of the Sea of Egypt with the heat of his breath,}
\text{and stretch out his hand over the River [Euphrates]}
\text{and divide it into seven streams,}
\text{for men to cross dry-shod,}
\text{to make a pathway for the remnant of his people ...}
\text{as there was for Israel}
\text{when it came out of Egypt.} \{53\}
\]

First Isaiah had made history a divine warning; after the catastrophe, in his Book of Consolation, Second Isaiah made history generate new hope for the future. If Yahweh had rescued Israel once in the past, he could do it again. He was masterminding the affairs of history; in his eyes, all the goyim were nothing more than a drop of water in a bucket. He was indeed the only God who counted. Second Isaiah imagined the old deities of Babylon being bundled on to carts and trundling off into the sunset. {54} Their day was over: 'Am I not Yahweh?' he asks repeatedly, 'there is no other god beside me.' {55}

\[
\text{No god was formed before me,}
\text{nor will be after me.}
\text{I, I am Yahweh,}
\text{there is no other saviour but me.} \{56\}
\]

Second Isaiah wastes no time denouncing the gods of the goyim, who, since the catastrophe, could have been seen as victorious. He calmly assumed that Yahweh - not Marduk or Baal - had performed the great mythical deeds that brought the world into being. For the first time, the Israelites became seriously interested in Yahweh's role in creation, perhaps because of renewed contact with the cosmological myths of Babylon. They were not, of course, attempting a scientific account of the physical origins of the universe but were trying to find comfort in the harsh world of the present. If Yahweh had defeated the monsters of chaos in primordial time, it would be a simple matter for him to redeem the exiled Israelites. Seeing the similarity between the Exodus myth and the pagan tales of victory over watery chaos at the beginning of time, Second Isaiah urged his people to look forward confidently to a new show of divine strength. Here, for example, he refers

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to the victory of Baal over Lotan, the sea-monster of Canaanite creation mythology, who was also called Rahab, the
Crocodile (tannim) and the Abyss (tehom):

Awake, awake! clothe yourself in strength,
arm of Yahweh,
Awake, as in the past,
in times of generations long ago.
Did you not split Rahab in two,
and pierce the Dragon (tannim) through?
Did you not dry up the sea,
the waters of the great Abyss (tehom),
to make the seabed a road
for the redeemed to cross? {57}

Yahweh had finally absorbed his rivals in the religious imagination of Israel; in exile, the lure of paganism lost its attraction
and the religion of Judaism had been born. At a time when the cult of Yahweh might reasonably have been expected to
perish, he became the means that enabled people to find hope in impossible circumstances.

Yahweh, therefore, had become the one and only God. There was no attempt to justify his claim philosophically. As always,
the new theology succeeded not because it could be demonstrated rationally but because it was effective in preventing
despair and inspiring hope. Dislocated and displaced as they were, the Jews no longer found the discontinuity of the cult of
Yahweh alien and disturbing. It spoke profoundly to their condition.

Yet there was nothing cosy about Second Isaiah's image of God. He remained beyond the grasp of the human mind:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
my ways not your ways - it is Yahweh who speaks.
Yes, the heavens are as high above earth
as my ways are above your ways,
my thoughts above your thoughts. {58}

The reality of God lay beyond the reach of words and concepts. Nor would Yahweh always do what his people expected.
In a very daring passage, which has particular poignancy today, the prophet looks forward to a time when Egypt and
Assyria would also become the People of Yahweh, alongside Israel. Yahweh would say: 'Blessed be my People Egypt,
Assyria my creature, and Israel my heritage.' {59} He had become the symbol of transcendent reality that made narrow
interpretations of election seem petty and inadequate.

When Cyrus, King of Persia, conquered the Babylonian empire in 539 BCE, it seemed as though the prophets had been
vindicated. Cyrus did not impose the Persian gods on his new subjects but worshipped at the Temple of Marduk when he
entered Babylon in triumph. He also restored the effigies of the gods belonging to the peoples conquered by the
Babylonians to their original homes. Now that the world had become accustomed to living in giant international empires,
Cyrus probably did not need to impose the old methods of deportation. It would ease the burden of rule if his subject
peoples worshipped their own gods in their own territories. Throughout his empire, he encouraged the restoration of ancient
temples, claiming repeatedly that their gods had charged him with the task. He was an example of the tolerance and breadth
of vision of some forms of pagan religion. In 538 Cyrus issued an edict permitting the Jews to return to Judah and rebuild
their own temple. Most of them, however, elected to stay behind: henceforth only a minority would live in the Promised
Land. The Bible tells us that 42,360 Jews left Babylon and Tel Aviv and began the trek home, where they imposed their
new Judaism on their bewildered brethren who had remained behind.

We can see what this entailed in the writings of the Priestly tradition (P), which were written after the exile and inserted into
the Pentateuch. This gave its own interpretation of the events described by J and E and added two new books, Numbers
and Leviticus. As we might expect, P had an exalted and sophisticated view of Yahweh. He did not believe, for example,
that anybody could actually see God in the way that J had suggested. Sharing many of the perspectives of Ezekiel, he
believed that there was a distinction between the human perception of God and the reality itself. In P's story of Moses on
Sinai, Moses begs for a vision of Yahweh, who replies: 'You cannot see my face, for no man can see me and live.' {60}
Instead, Moses must shield himself from the divine impact in a crevice of the rock, where he will catch a glimpse of Yahweh
as he departs, in a kind of hindsight. P had introduced an idea that would become extremely important in the history of God.
Men and women can only see an afterglow of the divine presence, which he calls 'the glory (kavod) of Yahweh', a
manifestation of his presence, which is not to be confused with God himself. {61} When Moses came down from the mountain, his own face had reflected this 'glory' and shone with such unbearable light that the Israelites could not look upon him.

The 'glory' of Yahweh was a symbol of his presence on earth and, as such, it emphasised the difference between the limited images of God created by men and women and the holiness of God himself. It was thus a counterbalance to the idolatrous nature of Israelite religion. When P looked back to the old stories of the Exodus, he did not imagine that Yahweh had himself accompanied the Israelites during their wanderings: that would be unseemly anthropomorphism. Instead, he shows the 'glory' of Yahweh filling the tent where he met with Moses. Similarly it would only be the 'glory of Yahweh' that would dwell in the Temple. {63}

P's most famous contribution to the Pentateuch was, of course, the account of creation in the first chapter of Genesis, which drew upon the Enuma Elish. P began with the waters of the primordial abyss (tehom, a corruption of Tiamat), out of which Yahweh fashions the heavens and earth. There was no battle of the Gods, however, or struggle with Yam, Lotan or Rahab. Yahweh alone was responsible for calling all things into being. There was no gradual emanation of reality but Yahweh achieved order by an effortless act of will. Naturally, P did not conceive the world as divine, composed of the same stuff as Yahweh. Indeed, the notion of 'separation' is crucial to P's theology: Yahweh made the cosmos an ordered place by separating night from day, water from dry land and light from darkness. At each stage, Yahweh blessed and sanctified the creation and pronounced it good'. Unlike the Babylonian story, the making of man was the climax of creation, not a comic afterthought. Men and women may not share the divine nature but they had been created in the image of God: they must carry on his creative tasks. As in the Enuma Elish, the six days of creation were followed by a sabbatical rest on the seventh day: in the Babylonian account, this had been the day when the Great Assembly had met to 'fix the destinies' and confer the divine tides upon Marduk. In P, the sabbath stood in symbolic contrast to the primordial chaos that had prevailed on Day One. The didactic tone and repetitions suggest that P's creation story was also designed for liturgical recital, like the Enuma Elish, to extol the work of Yahweh and enthrone him as Creator and Ruler of Israel. {64}

Naturally the new Temple was central to P's Judaism. In the Near East, the temple had often been seen as a replica of the cosmos. Temple-building had been an act of imitatio dei, enabling humanity to participate in the creativity of the gods themselves. During the exile, many of the Jews had found consolation in the old stories of the Ark of the Covenant, the portable shrine in which God had 'set up his tent' (shakan) with his people and shared their homelessness. When he described the building of the sanctuary, the Tent of Meeting in the wilderness, P drew upon the old mythology. Its architectural design was not original but a copy of the divine model: Moses is given very long and detailed instructions by Yahweh on Sinai: 'Build me a sanctuary so that I may dwell among you. In making the tabernacle and the furnishings, you must follow exactly the pattern I shall show you.' {65} The long account of the construction of this sanctuary is clearly not intended to be taken literally; nobody imagined that the ancient Israelites had really built such an elaborate shrine of 'gold, silver and bronze, purple stuffs, of violet shade and red, crimson stuffs, fine linen, goats hair, rams skin, acacia wood ...' and so forth. {66} This lengthy interpolation is heavily reminiscent of P's creation story. At each stage of the construction, Moses 'saw all the work', and 'blessed' the people, like Yahweh on the six days of creation. The sanctuary is built on the first day of the first month of the year; Bezalel, the architect of the shrine, is inspired by the spirit of God (ruach elohim) which also brooded over the creation of the world; and both accounts emphasise the importance of the sabbath rest. {67}

Temple-building was also a symbol of the original harmony that had prevailed before mankind had ruined the world.

In Deuteronomy the sabbath had been designed to give everybody, slaves included, a day off and to remind the Israelites of the Exodus. {6} P has given the sabbath a new significance: it becomes an act of the imitation of God and a commemoration of his creation of the world. When they observed the sabbath rest, Jews were participating in a ritual that God had originally observed alone: it was a symbolic attempt to live the divine life. In the old paganism, every human act had imitated the actions of the gods but the cult of Yahweh had revealed a huge gulf between the divine and human worlds. Now Jews were encouraged to come closer to Yahweh by observing the Torah of Moses. Deuteronomy had listed a number of obligatory laws, which had included the Ten Commandments. During and immediately after the exile, this had been elaborated into a complex legislation consisting of the 613 commandments (mitzvot) in the Pentateuch. These minute directives seem off-putting to an outsider and have been presented in a very negative light by the New Testament polemic. Jews did not find them a crushing burden, as Christians tend to imagine, but found that they were a symbolic way of living in the presence of God. In Deuteronomy, the dietary laws had been a sign of Israel's special status. {69} P also saw them as a ritualised attempt to share the holy separateness of God, healing the painful severance between man and the divine. Human nature could be sanctified when Israelites imitated God's creative actions by separating milk from meat, clean from unclean and sabbath from the rest of the week.
One of these distant heroes, venerated in Babylon as an example of patience in suffering, was Job. After the exile, one of the survivors used this old legend to ask fundamental questions about the nature of God and his responsibility for the sufferings of humanity. In the old story, Job had been tested by God; because he had borne his unmerited sufferings with patience, God had rewarded him by restoring his former prosperity. In the new version of the Job story, the author split the old legend in half and made Job rage against God's behaviour. Together with his three comforters, Job dares to question the divine decrees and engages in a fierce intellectual debate. For the first time in Jewish religious history, the religious imagination had turned to speculation of a more abstract nature. The prophets had claimed that God had allowed Israel to suffer because of its sins; the author of Job shows that some Israelites were no longer satisfied by the traditional answer. Job attacks this view and reveals its intellectual inadequacy but God suddenly cuts into his furious speculation. He reveals himself to Job in a vision, pointing to the marvels of the world he has created: how could a puny little creature like Job dare to argue with the transcendent God? Job submits, but a modern reader, who is looking for a more coherent and philosophical answer to the problem of suffering, will not be satisfied with this solution. The author of Job is not denying the right to question, however, but suggesting that the intellect alone is not equipped to deal with these imponderable matters. Intellectual speculation must give way to a direct revelation from God, such as the prophets received.

The Jews had not yet begun to philosophise but during the fourth century they came under the influence of Greek rationalism. In 332 BCE Alexander of Macedonia defeated Darius III of Persia and the Greeks began to colonise Asia and Africa. They founded city-states in Tyre, Sidon, Gaza, Philadelphia (Amman), Tripolis and even at Shechem. The Jews of Palestine and the diaspora were surrounded by an Hellenic culture which some found disturbing but others were excited by Greek theatre, philosophy, sport and poetry. They learned Greek, exercised at the gymnasium and took Greek names. Some fought as mercenaries in the Greek armies. They even translated their own scriptures into Greek, producing the version known as the Septuagint. Thus some Greeks came to know the God of Israel and decided to worship Yahweh (or lao, as they called him) alongside Zeus and Dionysius. Some were attracted to the synagogues or meeting houses, which the diaspora Jews had evolved in place of the Temple worship. There they read their scriptures, prayed and listened to sermons. The synagogue was unlike anything else in the rest of the ancient religious world. Since there was no ritual or sacrifice, it must have seemed more like a school of philosophy and many flocked to the synagogue if a well-known Jewish preacher came to town, as they would queue up to hear their own philosophers. Some Greeks even observed selected parts of the Torah and joined Jews in synthetics sects. During the fourth century BCE, there were isolated instances of Jews and Greeks merging Yahweh with one of the Greek gods.

Most Jews held aloof, however, and tension developed between Jews and Greeks in the Hellenistic cities of the Middle East. In the ancient world, religion was not a private matter. The gods were extremely important to the city and it was believed that they would withdraw their patronage if their cult were neglected. Jews, who claimed that these gods did not exist, were called 'atheists' and enemies of society. By the second century BCE this hostility was entrenched: in Palestine there had even been a revolt when Antiochus Epiphanes, the Seleucid governor, had attempted to Hellenise Jerusalem and introduce the cult of Zeus into the Temple. Jews had started to produce their own literature which argued that wisdom was not Greek cleverness but the fear of Yahweh. Wisdom literature was a well-established genre in the Middle East; it tried to delve into the meaning of life, not by philosophical reflection, but by inquiring into the best way to live: it was often highly pragmatic. The author of the book of Proverbs, who was writing in the third century BCE, went a little further and suggested that Wisdom was the masterplan that God had devised when he had created the world and, as such, was the first of his creatures. This idea would be very important to the early Christians, as we shall see in Chapter Four. The author personifies Wisdom so that she seems a separate person:

Yahweh created me when his purpose first unfolded
before the oldest of his works.
From everlasting I was firmly set,
from the beginning, before earth came into being ...
when he laid the foundations of the earth,
I was at his side, a master craftsman,
delighting him day after day, ever at play in his presence,
at play everywhere in the world,
delight to be with the sons of men. {70}

Wisdom was not a divine being, however, but is specifically said to have been created by God. She is similar to the 'glory'
of God described by the Priestly authors, representing the plan of God that human beings could glimpse in creation and in
human affairs: the author represents Wisdom (Hokhmah) wandering through the streets, calling people to fear Yahweh. In
the second century BCE, Jesus ben Sira, a devout Jew of Jerusalem, painted a similar portrait of Wisdom. He makes her
stand up in the Divine Council and sing her own praises: she had come forth from the mouth of the most High as the divine
Word by which God had created the world; she is present everywhere in creation but has taken up permanent residence
among the people of Israel. {71}

Like the 'glory' of Yahweh, the figure of Wisdom was a symbol of God's activity in the world. Jews were cultivating such an
exalted notion of Yahweh, that it was difficult to imagine him intervening directly in human affairs. Like P they preferred to
distinguish the God we could know and experience from the divine reality itself. When we read of the divine Wisdom
leaving God to wander through the world in search of humanity, it is hard not to be reminded of the pagan goddesses such as
Ishtar, Anat and Isis who had also descended from the divine world in a redemptive mission. Wisdom literature acquired
a polemic edge in Alexandria in about 50 BCE. In The Wisdom of Solomon, a Jew of Alexandria, where there was an
important Jewish community, warned Jews to resist the seductive Hellenic culture around them and to remain true to their
own traditions: it is the fear of Yahweh, not Greek philosophy, which constitutes true wisdom. Writing in Greek, he also
personified Wisdom (Sophia) and argued that it could not be separated from the Jewish God:

[Sophia] is the breath of the power of God,
pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty;

hence nothing impure can find a way into her.
She is a reflection of the eternal light,
untarnished mirror of God's active power,
image of his goodness. {72}

This passage would also be extremely important to Christians when they came to discuss the status of Jesus. The Jewish
author, however, simply saw Sophia as an aspect of the unknowable God who has adapted himself to human
understanding. She is God-as-he-has-revealed-himself-to-man, the human perception of God, which was mysteriously
distinct from the full reality of God which would always elude our understanding.

The author of The Wisdom of Solomon was right to sense a tension between Greek thought and Jewish religion. We have
seen that there is a crucial and, perhaps, an irreconcilable difference between the God of Aristotle, which is scarcely aware
of the world it has created, and the God of the Bible who is passionately involved in human affairs. The Greek God could
be discovered by human reason, whereas the God of the Bible only made himself known by means of revelation. A chasm
separated Yahweh from the world but Greeks believed that the gift of reason made human beings kin to God; they could,
therefore, reach him by their own efforts. Yet whenever monotheists fell in love with Greek philosophy, they inevitably
wanted to try to adapt its God to their own. This will be one of the major themes of our story. One of the first people
to make this attempt was the eminent Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria (c.30 BCE - 45 CE). Philo was a Platonist and
had a distinguished reputation as a rationalist philosopher in his own right. He wrote in beautiful Greek and does not seem to
have spoken Hebrew, yet he was also a devout Jew and an observer of the mitzvot. He could see no incompatibility
between his God and the God of the Greeks. It has to be said, however, that Philo's God seems very different from
Yahweh. For one thing, Philo seemed embarrassed by the historical books of the Bible, which he tried to turn into elaborate
allegories: Aristotle, it will be recalled, had considered history to be unphilosophical. His God has no human qualities: it is
quite incorrect, for example, to say that he is 'angry'. All we can know about God is the bare fact of his existence. Yet, as a
practising Jew, Philo did believe that God had revealed himself to the prophets. How had this been possible?

Philo explained the problem by making an important distinction between God's essence (ousia), which is entirely
incomprehensible, and his activities in the world, which he called his 'powers' (dynameis) or 'energies' (energeiai). Basically,
it was similar to the solution of P and the Wisdom writers. We can never know God as he is in himself. Philo makes him tell
Moses: 'the apprehension of me is something more than human nature, yea, even the whole heaven and universe, will be
able to contain.' {73} To adapt himself to our limited intellect, God communicates through his 'powers' which seem
equivalent to Plato's divine forms (though Philo is not always consistent about this). They are the highest realities that the
human mind can grasp. Philo sees them emanating from God, rather as Plato and Aristotle had seen the cosmos emanating
eternally from the First Cause. Two of these powers were especially important. Philo called them the Kingly power, which reveals God in the order of the universe, and the Creative power, whereby God reveals himself in the blessings he bestows upon humanity. Neither of these powers is to be confused with the divine essence (ousia), which remains shrouded in impenetrable mystery. They simply enable us to catch a glimpse of a reality which is beyond anything we can conceive. Sometimes Philo speaks of God's essential being (ousia) flanked by the Kingly and Creative powers in a kind of trinity. When he interprets the story of Yahweh's visit to Abraham at Mamre with the two angels, for example, he argues that this is an allegorical presentation of God's ousia - He Who Is - with the two senior powers. {74}

I would have been astonished by this and, indeed, Jews have always found Philo's conception of God somewhat inauthentic. Christians, however, would find him enormously helpful and the Greeks, as we shall see, seized upon this distinction between God's unknowable 'essence' and the 'energies' that make him known to us. They would also be influenced by his theory of the divine Logos. Like the Wisdom writers, Philo imagined that God had formed a masterplan (logos) of creation, which corresponded to Plato's realm of the forms. These forms were then incarnated in the physical universe. Again, Philo is not always consistent. Sometimes he suggests that Logos is one of the powers; at other times he seems to think it is higher than the powers, the highest idea of God that human beings can attain. When we contemplate the Logos, however, we form no positive knowledge of God: we are taken beyond the reach of discursive reason to an intuitive apprehension which is 'higher than a way of thinking, more precious than anything which is merely thought'. {75} It was an activity similar to Plato's contemplation (theoria). Philo insisted that we will never reach God as he is in himself: the highest truth we can apprehend is the rapturous recognition that God utterly transcends the human mind.

This is not as bleak as it sounds. Philo described a passionate, joyful voyage into the unknown, which brought him liberation and creative energy. Like Plato, he saw the soul as in exile, trapped in the physical world of matter. It must ascend to God, its true home, leaving passion, the senses and even language behind, because these bind us to the imperfect world. Finally, it will achieve an ecstasy that lifts it above the dreary confines of the ego to a larger, fuller reality. We have seen that the conception of God has often been an imaginative exercise. Prophets had reflected upon their experience and felt that it would achieve an ecstasy that lifts it above the dreary confines of the ego to a larger, fuller reality. We have seen that the conception of God has often been an imaginative exercise. Prophets had reflected upon their experience and felt that it could be ascribed to the being they called God. Philo shows that religious contemplation had much in common with other forms of creativity. There were times, he says, when he struggled grimly with his books and made no headway, but sometimes he felt possessed by the divine:

I ... have suddenly become full, the ideas descending like snow, so that under the impact of divine possession, I have been filled with Corybantic frenzy and become ignorant of everything, place, people, present, myself, what was said and what was written. For I acquired expression, ideas, an enjoyment of life, sharp-sighted vision, exceedingly distinct clarity of objects such as might occur through the eyes as a result of clearest display. {76}

Soon it would be impossible for Jews to achieve such a synthesis with the Greek world. In the year of Philo's death there were pogroms against the Jewish community in Alexandria and widespread fears of Jewish insurrection. When the Romans had established their empire in North Africa and the Middle East in the first century BCE they had themselves succumbed to the Greek culture, merging their ancestral deities with the Greek pantheon and adopting Greek philosophy with enthusiasm. They had not, however, inherited the Greek hostility to Jews. Indeed, they often favoured the Jews over the Greeks, regarding them as useful allies in Greek cities where there was residual hostility to Rome. Jews were given full religious liberty: their religion was known to be of great antiquity and this was respected. Relations between Jews and Romans were usually good even in Palestine, where foreign rule was accepted less easily. By the first century CE, Judaism was in a very strong position in the Roman empire. One tenth of the whole empire was Jewish: in Philo's Alexandria, forty per cent of the population were Jews. People in the Roman empire were searching for new religious solutions; monotheistic ideas were in the air and local gods were increasingly seen as mere manifestations of a more encompassing divinity.

The Romans were drawn to the high moral character of Judaism. Those who were understandably reluctant to be circumcised and observe the whole Torah often became honorary members of the synagogues, known as the 'Godfearers'. They were on the increase: it has even been suggested that one of the Flavian emperors might have converted to Judaism, as Constantine would later convert to Christianity. In Palestine, however, a group of political zealots fiercely opposed Roman rule. In 66 CE they orchestrated a rebellion against Rome and, incredibly, managed to hold the Roman armies at bay for four years. The authorities feared that the rebellion would spread to the Jews of the diaspora and were forced to crush it mercilessly. In 70 CE the armies of the new Emperor Vespasian finally conquered Jerusalem, burned the Temple to the ground and made the city a Roman city called Aelia Capitolana. Yet again the Jews were forced into exile.

The loss of the Temple, which had been the inspiration of the new Judaism, was a great grief but with hindsight it seems that
the Jews of Palestine, who were often more conservative than the Hellenised Jews of the diaspora, had already prepared themselves for the catastrophe. Various sects had sprung up in the Holy Land, which had in different ways dissociated themselves from the Jerusalem Temple. The Essenes and the Qumran sect believed that the Temple had become venal and corrupt; they had withdrawn to live in separate communities, such as the monastic-style community beside the Dead Sea. They believed that they were building a new Temple, not made with hands. Theirs would be a Temple of the Spirit; instead of the old animal sacrifices, they purified themselves and sought forgiveness of sins by baptismal ceremonies and communal meals. God would live in a loving brotherhood, not in a stone temple.

The most progressive of all the Jews of Palestine were the Pharisees, who found the solution of the Essenes too elitist. In the New Testament, the Pharisees are depicted as whitened sepulchres and blatant hypocrites. This is due to the distortions of first century polemic. The Pharisees were passionately spiritual Jews. They believed that the whole of Israel was called to be a holy nation of priests. God could be present in the humblest home as well as in the Temple. Consequently, they lived like the official priestly caste, observing the special laws of purity that applied only to the Temple in their own homes. They insisted on eating their meals in a state of ritual purity because they believed that the table of every single Jew was like God's altar in the Temple. They cultivated a sense of God's presence in the smallest detail of daily life. Jews could now approach him directly without the mediation of a priestly caste and an elaborate ritual. They could atone for their sins by acts of loving-kindness to their neighbour; charity was the most important mitzvah in the Torah; when two or three Jews studied the Torah together, God was in their midst. During the early years of the century, two rival schools had emerged: one led by Shammai the Elder, which was more rigorous, and the other led by the great Rabbi Hillel the Elder, which became by far the most popular Pharisical party. There is a story that one day a pagan had approached Hillel and told him that he would be willing to convert to Judaism, if the Master could recite the whole of the Torah to him while he stood on one leg. Hillel replied: 'do not do unto others as you would not have done unto you. That is the whole of the Torah: go and learn it.' {77}

By the disastrous year 70, the Pharisees had become the most respected and important sect of Palestinian Judaism; they had already shown their people that they did not need a Temple to worship God, as this famous story shows:

*Once as Rabbi Yohannan ben Zakkai was coming forth from Jerusalem, Rabbi Joshua followed after him and beheld the Temple in ruins.*

'Woe unto us!' Rabbi Joshua said, 'that this, the place where the iniquities of Israel were atoned for, is laid waste!'

'My son,' Rabbi Yohannan said, 'be not grieved. We have another atonement as effective as this. And what is it? It is acts of loving kindness, as it is said: "For I desire mercy and not sacrifice."' {78}

It is said that after the conquest of Jerusalem, Rabbi Yohannan had been smuggled out of the burning city in a coffin. He had been opposed to the Jewish revolt and thought that the Jews would be better off without a state. The Romans allowed him to found a self-governing Pharisical community at Jabneh, to the west of Jerusalem. Similar communities were founded in Palestine and Babylonia, which maintained close links. These communities produced the scholars known as the tannaim, including rabbinic heroes like Rabbi Yohannan himself, Rabbi Akiva the mystic and Rabbi Ishmael: they compiled the Mishnah, the codification of an oral law which brought the Mosaic law up to date. Next a new set of scholars, known as the amoraim, began a commentary on the Mishnah and produced the treatises known collectively as the Talmud. In fact two Talmuds had been compiled; the Jerusalem Talmud, which was completed by the end of the fourth century, and the Babylonian Talmud, which is considered the more authoritative and which was not completed until the end of the fifth century. The process continued as each generation of scholars began to comment in their turn on the Talmud and the exegesis of their predecessors. This legal contemplation is not as desiccated as outsiders tend to imagine. It was an endless meditation on the Word of God, the new Holy of Holies; each layer of exegesis represented the walls and courts of a new Temple, enshrining the presence of God among his people.

Yahweh had always been a transcendent deity, who directed human beings from above and without. The Rabbis made him intimately present within mankind and the smallest details of life. After the loss of the Temple and the harrowing experience of yet another exile, the Jews needed a God in their midst. The Rabbis did not construct any formal doctrines about God. Instead, they experienced him as an almost tangible presence. Their spirituality has been described as a state of 'normal mysticism'. {79} In the very earliest passages of the Talmud, God was experienced in mysterious physical phenomena. The Rabbis spoke about the Holy Spirit, which had brooded over creation and the building of the sanctuary, making its presence felt in a rushing wind or a blazing fire. Others heard it in the clanging of a bell or a sharp knocking sound. One day, for example, Rabbi Yohannan had been sitting discussing Ezekiel's vision of the chariot, when a fire descended from heaven and angels stood nearby: a voice from heaven confirmed that the Rabbi had a special mission from God. {80}
So strong was their sense of presence that any official, objective doctrines would have been quite out of place. The Rabbis frequently suggest that on Mount Sinai, each one of the Israelites who had been standing at the foot of the mountain had experienced God in a different way. God had, as it were, adapted himself to each person 'according to the comprehension of each'. {81} As one Rabbi put it, 'God does not come to man oppressively but commensurately with a man's power of receiving him.' {82} This very important rabbinic insight meant that God could not be described in a formula as though he were the same for everybody: he was an essentially subjective experience. Each individual would experience the reality of 'God' in a different way to answer the needs of his or her own particular temperament. Each one of the prophets had experienced God differently, the Rabbis insisted, because his personality had influenced his conception of the divine. We shall see that other monotheists would develop a very similar notion. To this day, theological ideas about God are private matters in Judaism and are not enforced by the establishment.

Any official doctrine would limit the essential mystery of God. The Rabbis pointed out that he was utterly incomprehensible. Not even Moses had been able to penetrate the mystery of God: after lengthy research, King David had admitted that it was futile to try to understand him, because he was too much for the human mind. {83} Jews were even forbidden to pronounce his name, a powerful reminder that any attempt to express him was bound to be inadequate: the divine name was written YHWH and not pronounced in any reading of the scripture. We could admire God's deeds in nature but, as Rabbi Huna said, this only gave us an infinitesimal glimpse of the whole reality: 'Man cannot conceive the meaning of thunder, hurricane, storm, the order of the universe, his own nature; how then can he boast of being able to understand the ways of the King of all Kings?' {84} The whole point of the idea of God was to encourage a sense of the mystery and wonder of life, not to find neat solutions. The Rabbis even warned the Israelites against praising God too frequently in their prayers, because their words were bound to be defective. {85}

How did this transcendent and incomprehensible being relate to the world? The Rabbis expressed their sense of this in a paradox: 'God is the place of the world, but the world is not his place': {86} God enveloped and encircled the world, as it were, but he did not live in it as mere creatures did. In another of their favourite images, they used to say that God filled the world as the soul fills the body: it informs but transcends it. Again, they said that God was like the rider of a horse: while he is on the horse, the rider depends upon the animal, but he is superior to it and has control of the reins. These were only images and, inevitably, inadequate: they were imaginative depictions of a huge and indefinable 'something' in which we live and move and have our being. When they spoke of God's presence on earth, they were as careful as the biblical writers to distinguish those traces of God that he allows us to see from the greater divine mystery which is inaccessible. They liked the images of the 'glory' (kavod) of YHWH and of the Holy Spirit, which were constant reminders that the God that we experience does not correspond to the essence of the divine reality.

One of their favourite synonyms for God was the Shekinah, which derived from the Hebrew shakan, to dwell with or to pitch one's tent. Now that the Temple was gone, the image of God who had accompanied the Israelites on their wanderings in the wilderness suggested the accessibility of God. Some said that the Shekinah, who dwelt with his people on earth, still lived on the Temple Mount, even though the Temple was in ruins. Other Rabbis argued that the destruction of the Temple had freed the Shekinah from Jerusalem and enabled it to inhabit the rest of the world. {87} Like the divine 'glory' or the Holy Spirit, the Shekinah was not conceived as a separate divine being but as the presence of God on earth. The Rabbis looked back on the history of their people and saw that it had always accompanied them:

*Come and see how beloved are the Israelites before God, for wherever they went the Shekinah followed them, as it is said, 'Did I plainly reveal myself to thy father's house when they were in Egypt?' In Babylon, the Shekinah was with them, as it is said, 'For your sake I have [been] sent to Babylon.' And when in the future Israel will be redeemed, the Shekinah will then be with them, as it is said, 'The Lord thy God will turn thy captivity.' That is, God will return with thy captivity. {88}*

The connection between Israel and its God was so strong that, when he had redeemed them in the past, the Israelites used to tell God: 'Thou hast redeemed thyself.' {89} In their own distinctly Jewish way, the Rabbis were developing that sense of God as identified with the self, which the Hindus had called Atman.

The image of the Shekinah helped the exiles to cultivate a sense of God's presence wherever they were. The Rabbis spoke of the Shekinah skipping from one synagogue of the diaspora to another; others said that it stood at the door of the synagogue, blessing each step that a Jew took on his way to the House of Studies; the Shekinah also stood at the door of the synagogue when the Jews recite the Shema there together. {90} Like the early Christians, the Israelites were encouraged by their Rabbis to see themselves as a united community with 'one body and one soul'. {91} The community was the new Temple, enshrining the immanent God: thus when they enter the synagogues and recite the Shema in perfect
unison 'with devotion, with one voice, one mind and one tone', God is present among them. But he hates any lack of harmony in the community and returns to heaven, where the angels chant the divine praises 'with one voice and one melody'. {92} The higher union of God and Israel could only exist when the lower union of Israelite with Israelite was complete: constantly, the Rabbis told them that when a group of Jews studied the Torah together, the Shekinah sat among them. {93}

In exile, the Jews felt the harshness of the surrounding world; this sense of presence helped them to feel enveloped by a benevolent God. When they bound their phylacteries (tfillin) to their hands and foreheads, donned the ritual fringed garments (zizit) and nailed the mezuzah containing the words of Shema over their doors, as Deuteronomy prescribed, they should not try to explain these obscure and peculiar practices. That would limit their value. Instead they should allow the performance of these mitzvot to nudge them into an awareness of God's enveloping love; 'Israel is beloved! The Bible surrounds him with mitzvot: tfillin on the head and arm, a mezuzah on the door, zizit on their clothes.' {94} They were like the gifts of jewels that a king gave to his wife to make her more beautiful to him. It was not easy. The Talmud shows that some people were wondering whether God made much difference in such a dark world. {95} The spirituality of the Rabbis became normative in Judaism, not merely among those who had fled Jerusalem but among Jews who had always lived in the diaspora. This was not because it was based on a sound theoretical foundation: many of the practices of the Law made no logical sense. The religion of the Rabbis was accepted because it worked. The vision of the Rabbis had prevented their people from falling into despair.

This type of spirituality was for men only, however, since women were not required - and therefore not permitted - to become Rabbis, to study Torah or to pray in the synagogue. The religion of God was becoming as patriarchal as most of the other ideologies of the period. The woman's role was to maintain the ritual purity of the home. Jews had long sanctified creation by separating its various items and in this spirit women were relegated to a separate sphere from their men folk, just as they were to keep milk separate from meat in their kitchens. In practice, this meant that they were regarded as inferior. Even though the Rabbis taught that women were blessed by God, men were commanded to thank God during the morning prayer for not making them Gentiles, slaves or women. Yet marriage was regarded as a sacred duty and family life was holy. The Rabbis stressed its sanctity in legislation that has often been misunderstood.

When sexual intercourse is forbidden during menstruation, this was not because a woman was to be regarded as dirty or disgusting. The period of abstinence was designed to prevent a man from taking his wife for granted: 'Because a man may become overly familiar with his wife, and thus repelled by her, the Torah says that she should be a niddah [sexually unavailable] for seven days [after menstruation] so that she will be as beloved to him [afterward] as on the day of marriage.' {96} Before going to the synagogue on a festival day, a man was commanded to take a ritual bath, not because he was unclean in any simplistic way but to make himself more holy for the sacred divine service. It is in this spirit that a woman was commanded to take a ritual bath after the menstrual period, to prepare herself for the holiness of what came next: sexual relations with her husband. The idea that sex could be holy in this way would be alien to Christianity, which would sometimes see sex and God as mutually incompatible. True, later Jews often gave a negative interpretation to these rabbinic directives but the Rabbis themselves did not preach a lugubrious, ascetic, life-denying spirituality.

On the contrary, they insisted that Jews had a duty to keep well and happy. They frequently depict the Holy Spirit 'leaving' or 'abandoning' such biblical characters as Jacob, David or Esther when they were sick or unhappy. {97} Sometimes they made them quote Psalm Twenty-two when they felt the Spirit leave them: 'My God, my God, why have you deserted me?' This raises an interesting question about Jesus's mysterious cry from the cross, when he quoted these words. The Rabbis taught that God did not want men and women to suffer. The body should be honoured and cared for, since it was in the image of God: it could even be sinful to avoid such pleasures as wine or sex, since God had provided them for man's enjoyment. God was not to be found in suffering and asceticism. When they urged their people to practical ways of 'possessing' the Holy Spirit, they were in one sense asking them to create their own image of God for themselves. They taught that it was not easy to say where God's work began and man's ended. The prophets had always made God audible on earth by attributing their own insights to him. Now the Rabbis were seen to be engaged in a task that was at once human and divine. When they formulated new legislation, it was seen both as God's and their own. By increasing the amount of Torah in the world, they were extending his presence in the world and making it more effective. They themselves came to be revered as the incarnations of Torah; they were more 'like God' than anybody else because of their expertise in the Law. {98}

This sense of an immanent God helped Jews to see humanity as sacred. Rabbi Akiva taught that the mitzvah: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself was 'the great principle of Torah'. {99} Offences against a fellow human being were a denial of God himself, who had made men and women in his image. It was tantamount to atheism, a blasphemous attempt to ignore God. Thus murder was the greatest of all crimes because it was a sacrilege: 'Scripture instructs us that whatsoever sheds
human blood is regarded as if he had diminished the divine image.' {100}

Serving another human being was an act of imitatio dei: it reproduced God's benevolence and compassion. Because all were created in God's image, all were equal: even the High Priest should be beaten if he injures his fellow man, because it is tantamount to denying the existence of God. {101} God created adam, a single man, to teach us that whoever destroyed a single human life would be punished as though he had destroyed the whole world; similarly to save a life was to redeem the whole world. {102} This was not just a lofty sentiment but a basic legal principle: it meant that no one individual could be sacrificed for the sake of a group during a pogrom, for example. To humiliate anybody, even a goy or a slave, was one of the most serious offences, because it was equivalent to murder, a sacrilegious denial of God's image. {103} The right to liberty was crucial: it is difficult to find a single reference to imprisonment in the whole of rabbinic literature, because only God can curtail the freedom of a human being. Spreading scandal about somebody was tantamount to denying the existence of God. {104} Jews were not to think of God as a Big Brother, watching their every move from above; instead they were to cultivate a sense of God within each human being so that our dealings with others became sacred encounters.

Animals have no difficulty in living up to their nature but men and women seem to find it hard to be fully human. The God of Israel had sometimes seemed to encourage a most unholy and inhumane cruelty. But over the centuries Yahweh had become an idea that could help people to cultivate a compassion and respect for their fellow human beings, which had always been a hallmark of the religions of the Axial Age. The ideals of the Rabbis were close to the second of the God-religions, which had its roots in exactly the same tradition.

3 - A Light to the Gentiles

At the same time as Philo was expounding his Platonised Judaism in Alexandria and Hillel and Shammai were arguing in Jerusalem, a charismatic faith healer began his own career in the north of Palestine. We know very little about Jesus. The first full-length account of his life was St Mark's Gospel, which was not written until about the year 70, some twenty years after his death. By that time, historical facts had been overlaid with mythical elements, which expressed the meaning Jesus had acquired for his followers more accurately than a straight biography would have done. The first Christians saw him as a new Moses, a new Joshua, the founder of a new Israel. Like the Buddha, Jesus had seemed to encapsulate some of the deepest aspirations of many of his contemporaries and to have given substance to dreams that had haunted the Jewish people for centuries. During his lifetime, many Jews in Palestine had believed that he was the Messiah: he had ridden into Jerusalem and been hailed as the Son of David but, only a few days later, he was put to death by the agonising Roman punishment of crucifixion. Yet despite the scandal of a Messiah who had died like a common criminal, his disciples could not believe that their faith in him had been misplaced. There were rumours that he had risen from the dead. Some said that his tomb had been found empty three days after his crucifixion; others saw him in visions and on one occasion 500 people saw him simultaneously. His disciples believed that he would soon return to inaugurate the Messianic Kingdom of God and, since there was nothing heretical about such a belief, their sect was accepted as authentically Jewish by no less a Person than Rabbi Gamaliel, the grandson of Hillel and one of the greatest of the tannaim. His followers worshipped in the Temple every day as fully observant Jews. Ultimately, however, the New Israel, inspired by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, would become a Gentile faith, which would evolve its own distinctive conception of God.

By the time of Jesus's death in about 30 CE, the Jews were passionate monotheists so nobody expected the Messiah to be a divine figure: he would simply be an ordinary, if privileged, human being. Some of the Rabbis suggested that his name and identity were known to God from all eternity. In that sense, therefore, the Messiah could be said to have been 'with God' from before the beginning of time in the same symbolic way as the figure of divine Wisdom in Proverbs and Ecclesiasticus. Jews expected the Messiah, the anointed one, to be a descendant of King David who, as King and spiritual leader, had founded the first independent Jewish kingdom in Jerusalem. The Psalms sometimes called David or the Messiah 'the Son of God' but that was simply a way of expressing his intimacy with Yahweh. Nobody since the return from Babylon had imagined that Yahweh actually had a son, like the abominable deities of the goyim.

Mark's Gospel, which as the earliest is usually regarded as the most reliable, presents Jesus as a perfectly normal man, with a family that included brothers and sisters. No angels announced his birth or sang over his crib. He had not been marked out during his infancy or adolescence as remarkable in any way. When he began to teach, his fellow townsmen in Nazareth were astonished that the son of the local carpenter should have turned out to be such a prodigy. Mark begins his narrative with Jesus's career. It seems that he may originally have been the disciple of one John the Baptist, a wandering ascetic who had probably been an Essene: John had regarded the Jerusalem establishment as hopelessly corrupt and preached excoriating sermons against it. He urged the populace to repent and to accept the Essene rite of purification by baptism in