MYTHSTAKES BOOK SEVEN: AND GOD MADE MAN (AND MAN MADE GOD)

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the previous six books discussing the mythstakes surrounding the creation of money and markets, it may have been noticed by the reader that we keep turning our attention to religion.

I should probably admit that this is partly due to the evolution of this work. My original intention was to write an essay called 'How Cosmology Caused the Great Recession', which was itself a sequel to an earlier essay of mine called 'How Religion Caused the Great Recession'.

Now, many a reader might well scoff at the idea that either religion or cosmology caused the inflation of the housing market bubble and subsequent crash. And, yes, if we were interested only in direct causes many more plausible possible candidates have been suggested. Indeed, one overview of the 2008 financial crisis has the telling title "Reading About the Financial Crisis: A 21-Book Review" (it's by Andrew Lo (b. 1960)). The findings of this study is that the crisis is (as Mark Blyth puts it) "both overexplained and overdetermined". 'Overexplained' refers to the fact that so many possible culprits have been suggested, along with seemingly compelling narratives justifying the finger pointing. Examples include 'Fannie Mae', 'Leverage Ratios' and 'Income Inequality'. The crisis is overdetermined in the sense that many of these supposed culprits might have acted differently and the crisis would have happened, regardless. In which case, while maybe having some influence on what happened, these were not direct causes.

In my original series, I stated up front that 'religion' was not directly responsible for the 2008 financial crisis, but in developing certain religious practices the USA in particular set itself up for a huge speculative bubble. A quick summary of these events would go something like this:

Early settlers practiced a harsh and judgemental form of Christianity called Calvinism, which focused on introspection in order to identify and eradicate sin. As the Wild West was tamed, Calvinism evolved into 'New Thought', the practitioners of which believed our thoughts can change reality. Introspection changed focus from obsessions over eradicating sin to obsessions over eradicating negative thought.

As consumerism developed, churches became more like businesses in both appearance and how they were run, while businesses (particularly those on Wall Street) became more religious, consulting with celebrity gurus and relying on a mixture of science and mysticism in their projections of growth.

The overall message from both mega churches and Wall Street was that positive thinking would make anyone rich and that anyone who voiced a negative opinion should be rejected. Those who did speak up about the dangers inherent in highly-leveraged borrowing and expanding the sub-prime mortgage sector were sacked, in accordance with 'New Thought'. So, we went into the mid-2000s with lots of Americans believing they would become rich if they could just believe with sufficient fervour in such an outcome, and that god would forgive

all debts in the sense of miraculously wiping out a bad credit history. But, as I concluded, “it seemed God was not on hand to save us from ourselves after all”.

If that summary sounds familiar, it is because that essay became incorporated into the third book of the Mythstakes series. The sequel to ‘How Religion Caused the Great Recession’ turned into a series when I realised that at the foundation of market crashes there was something that connected such catastrophes to Big Bang cosmology that could not be adequately explained if one talked only about economics and cosmology. That “something” was the inability to ask the right questions or, we could equally say, the tendency to keep asking the wrong ones.

Nor were these questions that were wrong in a very subtle way, such that it would be expected of people to not understand this unless they took an infeasibly close study of them. In fact, the evidence that wrong questions were being asked was pretty blatant, once one stopped treating certain “truths everybody knows” as indisputable facts and saw them for what they were- mere tales with little evidence to support them and substantial evidence pointing to their falsity.

Thus was born the concept of the Mythstake, a tale popularly and sincerely believed to be true, even though evidence points to it being false. The two most blatant examples I know of are the beliefs that money’s origins lie in barter and that our universe was born in a Big Bang. Since both of these Mythstakes keep leading us back to Religion, perhaps we should be looking into the origins of religious, as well as economic and cosmological, thinking?

The link between Religion and Cosmology are, I presume, fairly obvious. Both, after all, are ways of explaining one of the great mysteries which is “why is there something rather than nothing?”. Not that religion serves only to answer that question, but it should be obvious that creation myths concerning the origins of the universe have been part of religious teachings for thousands of years.

But Economics, well, that’s different. At first glance the theory of economics and cosmology might appear to have nothing to do with one another. After all, ‘economics’ is the very practical and everyday science of how ordinary folk interact under conditions of scarcity. It has obvious implications in our lives, as is made clear by the fact that financial news is never absent from the media. Indeed, reporters whose job it is to translate the obscure language of economists into something laypeople can understand nearly always begin by insisting that all the charts and graphs and numbers they are about to show, really do matter to us.

In stark contrast, ‘cosmology’ is the most remote, abstract and detached theory imaginable. It deals with weird concepts like ‘dark matter’, describes events happening in remote reaches of space and unimaginably distant periods of time. Most people live their lives neither knowing much at all about what cosmologists think, or why it should matter.

But first appearances can be deceptive. If you trace cosmology back to its roots, you discover that its origins lay in theology. As mentioned just now, all civilisations capable of leaving historical records had their creation myths, grand narratives about how the world came to be, and why things are as they are.

What do you find when you trace economics back to its roots? You discover that economics branched off from moral philosophy, which itself was a branch of theology. In other words, you arrive at the same beginning as cosmology. Also, like cosmology, economics is also a kind of creation story, a grand narrative about human behaviour and why society is the way it is.

The Choices

Speaking in the most general sense, there's a limited number of cosmological narratives we can construct. I shall now list them all:

The universe is eternal, forever existing and evolving (or goes through an endless repetitive cycle) and there is no god;

The universe came into being at some point in the past and will cease to be at some point in the future and there is no god;

The universe is eternal, forever existing, and there is a god (or, maybe, the universe is god);

The universe came into being at some point in the past and is evolving into god;

God existed before the universe, actively worked to bring it into being and then stepped aside to let it evolve without guidance or does direct it in some way toward some ultimate end.

That's it. While it may seem an endless array of creation myths and cosmologies have been constructed over the course of human history, they are all just variations of these alternatives.

But how are we to know which alternative really is the truth? Absent of 'revelation', in which God simply lets you in on the answer, secular reasoning has two main methods of obtaining such answers.

One way is via the empirical method. We can observe the way things are, and work backwards through history to as early a beginning as our current understanding and data can take us. In order to be practised properly, the empirical method requires the development, where appropriate, of mathematical descriptions of the patterns we observe around us if our narratives are to be anything more than mere just-so stories.

And then there is the second main method available to secular pursuers of the truth, which is Deduction. Here, you start at some idealised beginning and then proceed step by logical step to the current situation. When it is used appropriately, in the cartoon world of mathematical theorems where everything can be neatly quantified, deduction has delivered the most final and absolute truths we have, facts not to be disputed and which we know for certain will never be shown to be wrong.

But, when used to help shed light on the true nature of reality itself, this method has a flaw, in that it necessitates quantification and messy, chaotic reality is not always quantifiable. By

ignoring this truth, the deductive method pushes expertise to a whole other level, where it becomes authoritarian. It has a tendency to view the 'laws of nature' not as mere descriptions of reality but as the very embodiment of reality. To begin with mathematical assumptions of how reality must, by logical necessity, be, is to invite mystical thinking voiced in strange languages only an elite are privileged to know. As for the rest of us, we can only accept that this priesthood of lofty intellectuals have fathomed the deep mysteries. Their scriptures, their cosmological theories, their economic models, are gibberish to us or, as they would say, beyond our ability to comprehend.

Why Beliefs Dominate

At no time in history has one method been exclusively practiced or one of those choices about 'what is actually the case' universally accepted. People have always had different ideas about what's true and how to arrive at such a conclusion. But, throughout history, some ideas have dominated while alternatives were relegated to fringe theories.

The question is, why do certain beliefs come to dominate? The answer to that question also serves to point us in the direction of being able to answer why Mythstakes persist when we should know, thanks to much evidence, that they are wrong. Certain ideas come to dominate because the society we live in has an influence on the ideas we have about reality. Although at first glance many creation myths appear to talk about fantastic, magical events, to a large extent such narratives are just poetic ways of describing the zeitgeist of an age. Call this a symbiotic relationship; ideas about the heavens justify practices in society, while simultaneously societal practices are reflected in the stories we tell ourselves about creation.

Our ideologies affect our inclinations towards what makes sense. Is indefinite progress possible? Is hierarchy natural, with some meant to lord it over the rest? The social, political, and economic structures of everyday life have always affected the stories we tell about how things came to be as they are. So it was in the past and so it is now. Also, as mentioned before, it constrains our inquisitiveness by ensuring the wrong questions keep being asked.

Looking For The Money

One such example would be that oft-heard question, "where will we find the money to pay for X?". For some reason, the true answer to that question hardly ever gets expressed, even though we've known what it is for about five thousand years. But, then again, true answers can only make sense when the right questions are asked.

To see what I mean, imagine two teams playing a sport, and each is trying to earn more points than the other. The question is, where do those points they are trying to earn come from?

It should be obvious that this is the wrong question to ask, because it is nonsensical. Points are not material, they are relational. In a sports game you have a scorekeeper who authorises the addition or subtraction of points. He is not harvesting those points from trees, or mining them from the ground or fishing them from the sea; he just authorises those points into existence or deducts them from the score, if actions taken by the players warrant such decisions. Such decisions matter ONLY because everyone involved in the game-officials,

players, and fans- believe they matter and behave as if they matter. Furthermore, if all involved in the game- officials, players, and fans alike- all follow 'the rules' then they have to accept that doing X or Y will result in points being awarded, or points being deducted. Many of those rules may not apply outside of the game, but they do matter so long as one is on the pitch or the board or whatever boundary the game is played in.

So the points exist in intersubjectivity and nowhere else.

Well, the same thing is true of money. All money is, really, are the points we use to keep score of how value is being generated and distributed in the games called commercial markets and public duty. The chief scorekeeper is any government that has control over its own currency (so, states like the USA, Great Britain, Japan and Australia, to name a few). They authorise money into existence and other players (state/ local governments, businesses, households) can only EARN or CHEAT their way to accumulating those points. They have no authority to make those points, that's a privilege monopolised by the federal government (or Parliament in other countries with its own fiat currency).

But what is most important is that we believe the points ultimately authorised into existence by the chief scorekeeper (states that can issue their own currency) have the value they are claimed to have, just like collective agreement of the rules and points in any game are THE most important aspect of any game.

Without that collective agreement, that money-those points- have no value and no ability to persuade anyone to do anything.

So we can only conclude that what truly matters, what's really important, is intersubjective belief, the coordinated behaviours of groups of people. THAT is what keeps any game running, THAT is what makes productivity churn out goods and services and THAT is what gives points like money value. Take that belief away, and any game, whether it be rugby or backgammon, Capitalism or Christianity, stops having any meaning or existence.

Religion is not a Mythstake

So then, religion. Before getting into this topic I feel I should state once again that religion itself cannot be classified as a mythstake. The reason why not is because only that which is falsifiable in principle (and indeed has a large amount of evidence debunking in, evidence that is either ignored or explained away) counts as a mythstake. But why people hold religious beliefs can have nothing to do with reason or evidence. Also, the sheer flexibility of religion, as demonstrated by the variety of belief systems humans have dreamed up over the ages, means there's really no evidence that can persuade all those of faith that what they believe is nonsense, because there's always some religious belief systems somewhere that are compatible with whatever evidence we currently have. Furthermore, maybe it is we non-believers who are deluded, manipulated into not seeing the Truth because that's all somehow part of God's mysterious plan? Or maybe the Devil is tricking us into not knowing what is true? Or maybe, as the Buddhists would say, "our cup (of knowledge) is full" and we just can't open our minds to an extraordinarily different perspective on reality? You see, religious thinking is flexible enough to mean your Truth can be made to fit any evidence or

no evidence at all. So Religion is not falsifiable and therefore cannot be classed as a Mythstake.

Dark Matter and the Question of Falsifiability

Now, an interesting question is whether the same thing can be said of Big Bang cosmology. Is it so flexible as to be impossible to falsify and therefore more like a religion than a Mythstake, which can be falsified and indeed a good deal of falsifying data has already been obtained, but nevertheless the model retains its popularity?

We should also entertain the possibility that the Big Bang might actually have happened, and that the many gaps in the theory, patched over with hypothetical forces, matter, higher dimensions etc, might turn out to be natural phenomena rather than the theoreticians' equivalent of handwaving. Indeed, there are strong hints coming from particle physics that one of the biggest embarrassments for mainstream cosmology might finally be returning the results expected by the theory.

I am talking about dark matter. The best way to understand what's so embarrassing about it is to turn to an analogous situation. Imagine if, every now and then, the waters of Loch Ness were disturbed. Because its waters are so dark and murky, we cannot see what is disturbing the waters, but we can infer that there must be something in the loch, causing those effects we do see on the surface. Over time consensus builds, insisting that those disturbances can only be caused by the Loch Ness Monster.

There is, however, one major problem with saying it's Nessie that is causing those disturbances. Various kinds of underwater tech capable of acquiring direct evidence of Nessie has been sent into the loch, but this hunt for the Loch Ness monster has, so far, found zero direct evidence of any such creature.

Similarly, the existence of dark matter is not confirmed but rather inferred, because without plugging dark matter into its equations, the mainstream model is unable to account for some of the observations astronomy has made, such as the speed at which galaxies rotate and how structure is organised in our universe. Like disturbances seen on a lake, these actual phenomena hint at something unseen yet obviously present. But whenever we have tried to find dark matter itself, using instruments that should detect the stuff if it really does exist, those experiments have found nothing, and they've been running for decades.

Recently, however, there is exciting news coming from particle physics, reports of strong hints that something that could be dark matter has finally been detected. Those running this experiment are not saying they have definitely obtained direct evidence of its existence, but it's the strongest hint yet. Going back to the Nessie analogy, it would be like a photograph capturing something that looks very much like part of the Loch Ness Monster, such as its neck or its flipper. We cannot say for sure that this is definitely direct evidence of Nessie, because it's remotely plausible to be something else like a school of fish who momentarily swam in a formation that resembled a flipper just as the snap was taken, or aquatic plants whose fronds were shaped into something that looks like a neck by underwater currents. Similarly, the scientists conducting this search for dark matter have some unlikely but

possible alternative explanations to discount before they can say for sure that it has been found.

In the meantime, the lack of direct evidence of dark matter could be explained away by pointing out that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, just as, I suppose, those who wish to believe in Nessie can point out that just because all past attempts to get the monster on film failed (or turned out to be fake) that does not mean the next attempt must fail as well.

But, in the case of dark matter, we have more than just absence of evidence counting against its existence. We actually have evidence that contradicts its existence.

An example of such evidence would be a process known as ‘dynamic viscosity’ and the consequences this should have for certain groups of galaxies.

Let’s assume dark matter exists as abundantly as mainstream cosmology insists it does. If that were so, a galaxy would be moving through a background of dark matter. Dark matter is famously hard to detect, but it does have at least one influence on ordinary matter. The two interact gravitationally. Given the hypothesis that matter and dark matter have a gravitational influence on each other, as an object like a galaxy moves through dark matter, the dark matter would be attracted to it and, as a consequence, would congregate in a temporary concentration behind the galaxy.

That concentration of dark matter would have a mass sufficient to attract the galaxy and slow it down. To observers, unable to see the dark matter directly but able to measure its effects on the galaxy, it would be as if the latter was trying to travel through a viscous medium. This is known as dynamic viscosity and, if dark matter exists, it must exist as well.

But does it? No. How can we tell? Because, sometimes, a few galaxies come close enough together to form small groups. If there was such a thing as dark matter and, therefore, also dynamic viscosity, we know from careful calculations that dynamic viscosity would slow these galaxies down, and they would be pulled together and merge into a single galaxy.

So, any theory that includes dark matter has to also conclude that such groups of galaxies should be exceedingly rare in our universe, having collapsed and merged long, long ago.

But that’s not the case at all. In actual fact, astronomical observations reveal such galaxy groups to be very common, about a hundred times more than would be expected if dark matter’s dynamic viscosity was at play in the cosmos. The existence of so many such small groups of galaxies is in direct contradiction to the hypothesis that there is such a thing as dark matter. It’s like saying swans can only be white but having hundreds of snapshots and film of Australia’s black swans. The existence of the latter rules out the former theory.

The question is, why has the existence of so many such small groups of galaxies, far too many if dark matter and dynamic viscosity also exists, not been accepted as proof that there is no such thing as dark matter?

The answer is probably that so long as dark matter remains a hypothetical, rather than a real, entity, we are free to speculate on what properties it has. A particle that has been detected and measured has definite, quantifiable properties and thus either does everything it needs to do in order to fit neatly into your model, or is lacking in some property and thus does not quite fill in that gap. But a hypothetical particle, being a purely made-up entity, can have any properly the model needs to plug any inconvenient hole. So, if somebody points out that dark matter as we understand it would cause dynamic viscosity, and the latter is ruled out through astronomical observations, just hypothesise a new kind of dark matter that fits the current data.

This method of dealing with contradictory evidence was perhaps best put by a leading astrophysicist at Berkeley called Joseph Silk (b1942). “It’s impossible that the Big Bang is wrong. Perhaps we’ll have to make it more complicated to cover the observations, but it’s hard to think of what observations could ever refute the theory itself”.

But, if a theory cannot be falsified, because every time conflicting evidence is found a new hypothetical form of matter, or energy, or higher dimension, or whatever, is shoehorned into the model so as to retrofit it to current observations, it can no longer be considered science, at least not according to the definition proposed by Karl Popper (1902-1944) who insisted that what distinguishes Science from religion and ideology is that a scientific theory is in principle falsifiable.

If the Big Bang theory is not science, though, what is it? Is it a Mythstake, a hypothesis that has been falsified but nevertheless persists for some reason other than alignment to reality? Or does its ability to endlessly multiply abstractions when confronted with contradictory evidence, retrofitting it to contemporary knowledge of the cosmos, make it so flexible and adaptable as to make any notion of falsifiability quite inconceivable, in which case confidence in the Big Bang in the face of mounting evidence of its invalidity and a growing tower of retrofitted fancies would be more like religious faith?

Such questions, interesting though they are, are going to have to be put aside, because really this particular book is not concerned with whether mainstream cosmology is Science, Religion, or Mythstake. No, this book is about Religion. While Religion itself is not falsifiable, I would argue that the same cannot be said of explanations as to why we ever came to hold religious views to begin with. Some such explanations are, I believe, falsifiable and, indeed, the evidence against is substantial enough to warrant calling continued faith in the validity of such explanations another Mythstake.

CHAPTER ONE

The Dawn Of Souls

Something Philosophy is notorious for is asking deceptively simple questions which never seem to have simple answers. Many such questions are those to do with matters that are very personal indeed. For tens of thousands of years, people have asked themselves whether or not they have souls; how or if personal identity can survive when everything changes over time, and if it matters that we will one day die and, if so, why it matters. No matter how such questions are answered, difficulties always seem to crop up which leave room for doubt that the definitive solution has been found.

For example, a great many people believe in concepts like the soul and life after death. In fact, it could almost be said to be a defining feature of humans that, along with being the "storytelling animal", we are the animal that is aware of its own mortality and yet hopes for some kind of continuation (though, as we shall see, the strong desire for personal psychology to survive death has not always been something we longed for). But, even if we are essentially incorporeal souls, how does something so profoundly otherworldly and immaterial control the body, and why do we feel such an intimate union with the flesh? On the other hand, if all we are is flesh and bone, then how does conscious experience fit into this concept of an entirely material reality? Why are we not like Data from Star Trek the Next Generation, responding to environmental stimuli in a way that excludes "what it is like" to experience qualia like redness or the taste of oranges? And how would life after death, promised by so many religions, be possible if we did not have immortal souls?

The Afterlife

It is plain, from countless rituals, memorials, and such, that people have concerned themselves with matters related to the soul and personal identity for a very long time indeed. In fact, if ritualistic practices are diagnostic of a belief in an afterlife, then we may suppose such beliefs extend way back into prehistoric times. Archaeologists have unearthed shallow graves in France, Israel and China containing the remains of Neanderthal, a hominid species that went extinct some 28,000 years ago. More importantly, around the remains were stones of a uniform size that had clearly been deliberately selected and carefully arranged.

Sadly, the Neanderthal left no written records so we do not really know why they thought it necessary to adorn their graves in this way, or what meaning this practice may have had. But it is quite reasonable to assume, from the way the stones are so carefully selected and positioned, that it meant something. To most anthropologists, it suggests that Neanderthals used such a practice as a way of giving expression to a belief that at least some of their ancestors would go on to an afterlife after their physical bodies died.

If Neanderthals did have some sort of a belief in an afterlife, they were a very rare species. In most cases, we have no reason to believe that animals have a future-oriented concern with death. While we have countless examples of species that strive to protect themselves and their young in a way that strongly suggests a desire not to die, we have very little evidence that suggests a concern with death that isn't bound to the present. Elephants have been observed reacting to remains of deceased relatives in a way that suggests they mourn

their dead, and it's remotely plausible that they believe in an afterlife, too, at least to the extent to which such complex thoughts can be formulated in an elephant's mind. But most other species give us no cause whatsoever to suppose they hold such beliefs.

It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that if you go back far enough, there must have been a time when no species had the capacity to believe in an afterlife. But now we know for sure that one species has such beliefs (our own species) and have some reason to suppose a couple of others do/ did as well (remotely plausible in the case of elephants, much more likely in the case of Neanderthal).

Therefore, something must have happened to cause a change in attitudes in the evolutionary descendants of our species (and, just maybe, elephants too) such that they transitioned from a concern with death that was bound to the present and the sensory experience, to a future-oriented concern involving abstract concepts like souls, spirits, heaven and so on.

One possibility is that the afterlife is real and that a few species eventually developed enough mental capability to be able to discover this fact, just as we discovered things like electromagnetism, galaxies and Pythagoras' Theorem, which most other species are presumably totally ignorant of.

I think it's fair to say that most people still believe that humans have souls, or at least some spiritual quality that means people cannot really be reduced to mere assemblies of atoms. Notice how a majority of people seem to struggle to accept that machines could ever be truly conscious, no matter how complex a brain and nervous system we may learn how to engineer in the future. To borrow the derogatory language the human characters in 'Battlestar Galactica' used, "Toasters" just don't go to heaven.

The Costs of Being Wrong

Still, we should ask ourselves if there could be secular reasons why people believe in an afterlife, and thus such a belief would persist even if we actually didn't have immortal souls and our individual lives just ended at death. It turns out that there is actually a pretty strong secular argument for supposing we evolved to believe in the afterlife, whether it exists or not. Since that is so, could we therefore claim that the popular assumption that continued belief in an afterlife can have no explanation other than an understanding (perhaps on an unconscious level) that we are ensouled, is a form of mythstake? Personally I am not sure. I am just throwing the possibility out there.

But, anyway, what is this alternative reason? Those who have read Book Six may recall how people seem to be evolutionarily wired to see agency around them, and are not naturally inclined to think things happen for no reason at all. To see why this tendency evolved, one only need consider the costs that come with being wrong.

So, let's assume an animal hears leaves on a bush rustle, or sees a shadow out of the corner of its eye, and its instinct is that something with malevolent agency, like a predator, is about to pounce. Before that can happen, the animal runs away.

But what if the animal is wrong? What if there really wasn't a predator lurking in that bush, and it was merely a breeze rustling the leaves? What if that shadow was only a cloud passing over the sun? In that case, running away for no good reason would have cost that animal wasted energy. But at least it's still alive.

Now imagine an animal that instinctively thinks "ah, it's nothing", whenever leaves on a bush rustle, shadows loom etc etc. Such an animal would never waste energy fleeing for no good reason.

But what if it's wrong? What if, on this occasion, there really is a predator lurking in that bush or that shadow is a passing eagle? In that case the cost the animal will pay will be its very life. It's taken out of the gene-pool which, in evolutionary terms, is way more costly than wasting some energy by fleeing at the first sign of danger.

You can see, then, how we are the descendants of those ancestors who jumped at shadows, and thus are hard-wired not to assume things happen for no reason. Obviously, we don't literally run away at the slightest hint of danger ("a shadow! Flee for your lives!"), instead we evolved to not have a totally hair-trigger flight response (unless, of course, you're a prey species on the menu of many a predator) but we still naturally tend towards a feeling that agency is operant in the world around us.

That might go some way to explaining why we came to believe in gods, but why should we have come to believe that, even if and when we do die, we will nevertheless somehow continue existing in an afterlife?

The Cause of the Afterlife According to Secularism

The secular explanation for this belief begins by asking: What do Neanderthals, elephants and humans have in common? Well, they are all animals, obviously, but more importantly they are (or were) all social animals. We know for sure that humans live in very complex societies, as do other primates and elephants. Their societies are nowhere near as complex as ours, but they do have strong social ties and live out their existence as members of groups.

When one becomes a social animal and is dependent on others with whom one cooperates and is occasionally in competition with (such as times when there is fighting over mates to be done) there is a strong evolutionary pressure to develop theory of mind. It does not take much imagination to see that, when you live in social groups, it is useful to be able to model other members' mental states, and use 'folk psychology' to infer what others might be thinking and feeling. That way, if some other member reacts to danger, or is attracted to a potential reward, you don't suppose they are responding for no reason but instead adjust your own behaviour based on what you infer about their thoughts and feelings.

Also, when you live in social groups, it is very advantageous to develop an understanding, even if it is only on an innate level, that just because you cannot see or hear some other member, they have not therefore ceased to exist. Any individual in a social group that does believe something only exists when its presence is physically felt won't pay much attention when other members sneak off to do something disadvantageous like stealing its food, killing

its children or absconding with its mate. But, those who wonder what those they cannot see or hear might be thinking and doing under the cover of secrecy are more likely to rumble the nefarious plots of those intent on doing harm behind their backs, and so they have a selective advantage when it comes to the evolutionary goal of surviving long enough to pass on one's genes to the next generation.

The more complex society becomes, the better you need to be at modelling others' minds and thinking about what they are up to when out of sight. Psychologists have a name for this ability to understand that those who are not present nevertheless exist and to imagine what they might be doing. They call it 'Permanent Person Presence'.

Now here's the crucial aspect of all this. Perhaps there is no strong selection pressure to evolve the ability to turn off 'Permanent Person Presence' when a member has died and therefore actually has ceased to exist. When it comes to bodies, there are good reasons to develop the ability to distinguish life from death. Living things might attack you, or steal your food, or run off with your mate. Dead bodies do none of these things, so it helps to understand when a body is not going to get up and cause trouble.

Also, dead bodies are very unhygienic things to be around, so we evolved instincts of disgust and are repelled by the sight and smell of cadavers. But, other people's thoughts and feelings do not smell bad and, if never physically carried out, cause no harm even if that was the intent. So there is far less reason for natural selection to favour genes that code for the ability to turn off Permanent Person Presence when a member dies. It is extremely useful to model another individual's psychological states when they are alive and might be about to do something out of sight you would rather they did not do, or which would be advantageous for you to share in, but there is no strong reason to switch off such an ability when that person is dead.

Therefore, when somebody dies, and particularly when it is someone we were very familiar with and have developed vivid mental models of what they were like, our still-active 'Permanent Person Presence' naturally leads us to suppose they are still 'somewhere', doing 'something', if not in an embodied sense than in some ethereal manner of speaking. Perhaps the best example of this sort of belief was the atheist who was asked if a dead person would continue to believe in Heaven, to which he replied "no because now that he is dead he can see there is no Afterlife".

Social animals that have developed 'Permanent Person Presence' can imagine those that are not physically present existing nevertheless. They can remember what others did in the past and use such knowledge to infer what they might do in the future, or in some hypothetical scenario. We rely on the knowledge of our older relations and so, once language developed, we naturally told each other stories, myths and legends about what our ancestors did so we might learn from their examples.

On that note, it's likely very significant that when anthropologists study traditional cultures in order to find out why such people believe at least some members exist beyond physical death, such studies typically conclude that such beliefs originate in visions and dreams in which ancestors from beyond the grave visit the living. This is of course explainable both in

terms of ancestors actually communicating through visions and dreams, and ‘Permanent Person Presence’ causing the living to imagine this is what is happening.

But, there is at least one important difference between afterlife beliefs in traditional cultures, and those held by people who belong to cultures that have developed organised religions like Islam or Christianity. In traditional cultures, ancestors form part of one’s social world. It is deemed perfectly normal to communicate with the Dead, seeking advice when one has problems, as one might seek the council of a living grandparent. However, there does not seem to be any particular longing to become an ancestor; no desire to shuffle off this mortal coil and exist in some ethereal form in some spiritual plane. Instead, becoming an ancestor is merely accepted as just another fact of life, along with growing into adulthood or becoming aged.

In contrast, in many of today’s Western cultures, belief in dead ancestors existing in some spiritual plane is combined with a strong desire to personally survive bodily death, and this longing is particularly strong when it is held that the afterlife might be closer to paradise than earthly experience. In such cultures, there is a far greater tendency to concern oneself with the thought that our individual selves will continue after death, and anxiety over what such an existence might be like.

We can see, then, that beliefs in souls, the afterlife and all that developed through various stages, from nobody having beliefs of this kind, to vague beliefs about ancestors existing somewhere doing something beyond the grave, to vivid conceptions of heaven or hell and their equivalents like ‘Valhalla’ or ‘Elysium’ and strong concerns over the continuation and fate of our personal identities.

CHAPTER TWO

The Secular Version of God's Origins

In the last chapter, we looked into secular reasons why belief in some sort of afterlife (a major feature of many religions) could have come to occupy our minds. Another common feature of many religions is belief in the existence of God(s).

Now, I don't know about you, but I had always assumed that 'monotheism' was a belief that arose relatively late in human thought. To my mind, belief in one God was a feature of Western religions that have dominated since the fall of the Roman Empire, and that all religions that came before involved the worship of multiple gods. In his book 'The God Delusion', Richard Dawkins summarised the development of the idea of God as "a progression from tribal animism, through polytheisms such as those of the Greeks, Romans and Norsemen, to monotheism such as Judaism".

This seems to reflect the progression of religious belief as I am familiar with it. Long, long ago, our ancestors had a vague notion that unseen 'souls' or 'spirits' dwelled within the rocks, the waters, the animals and so on. Then, as these people developed more elaborate mythologies, these vague spirits became more anthropomorphised and personalised, becoming 'goddesses of love', 'gods of war', 'gods of spring' and so on. Later still, these pantheons of the gods got whittled down to one omnipresent and omnipotent deity.

Such a progression is suggestive of an evolution of thought that is perhaps appealing to a committed atheist like Dawkins. Our earliest ancestors believed in many mythological deities who often acted in capricious and whimsical ways. This polytheism then gave way to a rather more mature monotheism, a worldview that posited one god, a god who was not prone to mischief but who was rather a law giver who brought order to the universe, making it something we could understand through our god-given gifts of rational thought (although, to many theologians, God is to be conceptualised as outside and above the laws of nature that he wrote, and is therefore able to suspend them in order to perform miracles). From this stage it's easy to see what the next development for a maturing human race ought to be. It is to go one god better and remove that single deity of monotheism, believing instead in the evolution of a totally natural universe, one governed by 'rules' revealed to us through materialist science.

The Original Monotheist God

It turns out, though, that this is not a story that everyone subscribes to. In 1912 one father Wilhelm Schmidt (1808-1954) published 'The Origin of the Idea of God'. In his version of the origins of religion, monotheism was not a relative newcomer but rather was the original conception of God. According to his version of events, long before people had been building temples and sculpting statues in dedication to polytheistic deities, they had believed in a single supreme being who was first cause of all things and ruler of heaven and earth.

But there was one notable difference between this original supreme being and the god of later monotheisms. Whereas the Christian god (for example) has inspired countless forms of devotional art, cults, organisations and people like priests, popes and prophets who claim

to be able to interpret His will, no cults were built around the original supreme being, nobody presumed to be able to interpret the will of this god, and nobody attempted to portray this god in any kind of devotional art. The reason why this original God did not inspire the sort of devotional practices we now recognise as quintessentially religious was because this was a deity that was far less personal, and far more aloof than the God of later monotheisms. This god was conceived of as governing human affairs from afar, and so far removed from the experiences of mortal beings as to be beyond any possible human conception.

According to this theory, then, there should be no physical evidence- no paintings, no statues, no temples or anything- left to tell us that our ancestors believed in Schmidt's original singular god. Why, then, should we believe this story? What evidence is there to support Schmidt's claims? Well, many African tribes believe in what anthropologists call a 'Sky God' (also known as a 'High God') who is like Schmidt's original god in many respects. Most especially, while this sky god is believed to rule from heaven, be watching over us and ready to punish wrongdoers, at the same time there is a belief that such a god is beyond human expression. This leads to this god being absent in the lives of these tribes in a way that would seem strange to those of us who are used to religions that make great use of symbolic representations of their gods. Just like Schmidt's god, the Sky God is never depicted in effigies and no cults are ever organised around him.

The God that (Literally?) Went Away

Interestingly, for some of these tribes, belief in this supreme, remote and inexpressible deity has, over the generations, played a diminishing role in people's lives, to the point where some say this god has "gone away". This is something else that would seem to coincide with Schmidt's take on the first god. His theory was that eventually this god's very remoteness and inexpressibility proved to be his undoing, because he faded from human consciousness. Just as the Sky God of many African tribes has been forgotten and replaced by lesser gods that have the advantage of seeming more accessible and relatable, so too did the pantheon of gods as depicted in Pagan polytheisms present less exalted but more relatable gods for people to worship.

Regardless of whether or not this original monotheism as conceived by Schmidt actually existed, the fate of the tribal Sky God tells us something interesting about religious beliefs. These are ideas that survive in the collective consciousness so long as they 'work', and it should not be presumed that by 'working' what is always meant is "offering explanations that would satisfy philosophers or scientists". In fact, as we will see, oftentimes our ancestors were simply not concerned with details that later philosophers would consider vitally important questions to answer.

Anyway, once it ceases to be the case that a conception of God 'works' (whatever that means) such deities fade from the memory of a people and are forgotten. The way the African tribes portray this implies people don't admit that this god was something they made up. Instead, they think of this god becoming increasingly remote until it is claimed he has 'departed'. Some time later, he is forgotten entirely.

Or, at least, that seems to be the common anthropological explanation for why tribal societies once believed in a sky god and then let that myth fade from consciousness, all

without really questioning the validity of the idea. But, what if this presumption is wrong? What if there once really was a sky god or, rather, something our pre-scientific ancestors took to be a god? What if that 'something' really did depart, in the sense of some awe-inspiring spectacle that once dominated the skies but then physically moved away?

Religion Never Dies

We'll leave that question hanging for now and consider, instead, how abandoning old gods who, for whatever reason, no longer have relevance, has never resulted in the end of Religion itself. Religion is one of the most flexible ideas ever conceived of, as evidenced by the bewildering number of beliefs humans have dreamed up over the course of our existence. Sometimes, particular religious beliefs fade from memory, but these are always replaced by other religious beliefs that have what it takes to have relevance in contemporary life.

Some people believe the supreme deity of today's monotheisms is due to go the same way as the original god or the Sky God- relegated to ever more remote concepts until he is forgotten entirely. Certainly, the Medieval conception of heaven as a place literally 'up there' beyond the outermost crystal sphere of Ptolemy's geocentric model can no longer have any credibility in light of what modern astronomy has revealed. It takes some real metaphysical gymnastics to conceive of a religion that retains the core elements of beliefs formulated thousands of years ago with the findings of modern science. For committed atheists like Dawkins, the unstoppable progress of Science should reveal god to be irrelevant as an explanation for more and more aspects of reality until a point is reached where we finally mature, understand that belief in any kind of god was a 'delusion' and reject religion altogether.

But, while philosophers like Nietzsche have proclaimed 'God is dead' and scientists like Dawkins have attempted to show that belief in a god is delusional, perhaps this belief that religion is about to expire is just as premature as it would have been had somebody suggested it at a time when the Pagan polytheisms were fading from people's concerns? Perhaps now, just as in all the times that have passed, religion won't die but will instead replace old religious ideas with new ones?

The Market God

For example, it has been pointed out that our faith in Capitalism is akin to a religious belief. Most especially, there is that idea, commonly attributed to Adam Smith and explored in the first four books of this series, that we can all look out for number one and compete to gain maximum possible material advantage over others via whatever methods we can get away with using, and all under no regulatory oversight whatsoever (or, if not none, then the bare minimum of regulations) and the end result would not be the anarchic hell that Thomas Hobbes imagined, but rather an outcome that is of benefit to all, almost as if some benevolent god of competitive markets had guided our selfish activities towards the best outcome altruism could achieve. In Adam Smith's description of this scenario, it's not difficult to see the God concept in his talk of an 'invisible hand' guiding selfish intentions towards altruistic outcomes.

As religious beliefs go, this is a pretty bizarre one, given that history and anthropology clearly show commercial markets never evolved on their own, independent of 'state interference', but rather driven by material exchanges that begin with individuals who don't owe anything to anyone bartering with other similarly unsocial individuals. No, what the evidence shows is that bartering played such a negligible role in the origins of money as to have had, to all intents and purposes, nothing to do with money's origins, and the emphasis that economists from Smith to Marx to economists in our own time place on its role in money's evolution amounts to just another creation myth.

The purpose of this myth is to separate money from the messy complexities of human life and politics. In reality, though, commercial markets have never existed independently of politics, because they were created by states in order to finance their imperialist ambitions. As David Graeber wisely pointed out, "whenever anyone talks about 'free markets', you should look out for the man with the gun. He's never far away". Violence has always been an intrinsic part of commercial free markets, although over time this violence can transform from more overt into more implied forms (although, as anarchists are often uniquely placed to find out, anyone who seriously denies the violent potential of capitalist bureaucracy in order to live outside of its worldview invariably discover its latent violence becomes actual).

And then there is that belief that the great improvements we have experienced, making our lives incomparably more comfortable compared to our ancestors (if you live in a First-world country, that is) are due entirely to this god 'Capitalism,' the benevolent force that lifts all boats on a tide of rising prosperity. What this belief is based on, is the idea that if people had done nothing but continue to obey the orders of the business elite, those improvements we do in fact enjoy would surely have happened.

But history shows that this was just not the case. No Capitalist ever said "hey, now that my business has reached this level of profitability, it's time to reward the loyalty of my employees. So, from now on, they all get the weekend off and higher rates of pay". Or, if one or two did behave in such a way, certainly not enough to make a meaningful difference. Had things turned out like my imagined scenario, unionisation and socialism could never have gotten started, for there never would have been any reason to begin this sort of political action.

No, the whole reason why workers' unions, socialist organisations and labour governments formed was because the proletariat surveyed the results of Capitalism and wondered what the point of all the social upheaval and technological change it had unleashed was if, at the end of it all, there was just greater concentrations of wealth and power that left everyone else no better off (or maybe even worse off). In actual fact most of the things cited as benefits of 'capitalism' such as weekends off, paid holiday entitlement, and pay packets that afford a dignified life as opposed to one spent forever circling the drain of absolute poverty,had to be won from the capitalists via workers' struggles, a class war that sometimes involved the possibility of literally being shot for the temerity to make such demands. Nor should we assume that, once socialist reforms have made capitalism work for us all, those improvements remain forever in place. The developments of globalism and the move to a 'gig' economy, has resulted in quite a few of these benefits being taken away, throwing employees back into conditions of greater precariousness.

And yet, despite all this historical evidence there is still this belief that you can have a system of aggressive, self-interested acquisition that will somehow transform into one of benevolent redistribution via the guidance of the 'invisible hand'. As has been pointed out in Book Three, that invisible hand was really just the Christian god reimagined to suit 19th century robber barons and 20th century wolves of Wall Street.

It's also worth noting the language that is used to portray goings on in market activity. Rather than attribute all that only to aggregate co-operation and competition among people, we typically speak as if markets themselves are responding to the ups and downs of economic conditions. So, for instance, experts will say "markets have responded favourably to the decision to cut taxes". Since it is a prevailing belief that markets have an opinion and emotional reaction to events, we can easily imagine those same experts imagining "markets responding negatively to the total extinction of the human race".

It should be obvious that markets themselves have no preferences, feelings, reactions or goals, above and beyond those of people engaged in economic activity. This way of thinking is just a fairly modern variation of the ancient assumption that we should adjust our actions according to what priests and other religious officials tell us "the gods" feel about current affairs. "The markets responded negatively to the increase in minimum wage" is the equivalent of "it pleases Zeus that a temple has been commissioned".

The Technological Singularity: God from The Machine

Another, more modern candidate for replacing religion as we know it might be the 'Technological Singularity'. This is the idea that some kind of technological development- most popularly artificial intelligence but other forms such as implanting brain-enhancing chips or achieving superior powers of collaboration between groups of humans and machines via networks like the Web have been proposed- will result in the awakening of an intelligence qualitatively greater than any human's, and maybe even superior to the intellectual and creative powers of the human race itself.

When this scenario was first outlined by the likes of Vernor Vinge (1944-2024), it was conceived of as placing a barrier of profound unknowability between us and the future. Vinge said something to the effect of that if you could go back in time hundreds of thousands of years, find an infant from that period and then bring her into our time, you could raise that Neolithic child as one of your own and she would grow into an adult as capable of grasping our contemporary life as any average person would be. But, if you were to try to explain games consoles or 'electromagnetism' to a goldfish, then no matter how much you simplified this explanation ("box make game!") your efforts would be wasted, because goldfish are fundamentally incapable of such understanding.

According to Vinge, after the Singularity has happened we will be in the same position as that goldfish. We would not be capable of understanding the philosophical or scientific theories these vast intellects had developed (the thoughts of these superintelligences might not even be concerned with 'science' and 'philosophy', which are merely human constructs; they may instead concern themselves with mental constructs that cannot be expressed in any human language). Assuming this would be the case, then it becomes obvious that, past a certain point (i.e, that point where superintelligence exists) we cannot really imagine what

the future might be like. This supposition is why Vinge coined this moment in future history the 'Technological Singularity', borrowing a term from physics that refers to conditions where mass reaches such extreme energies our physics models break down and are no longer capable of shedding light on what goes on under such conditions (theoretical physicists typically cite 'black holes' and 'the moment of the Big Bang' as natural events where singularity-creating conditions actually arise).

But this vision of the 'Singularity' (one which bears some similarity to that aloof and unknowable Sky God) soon transformed into one where technological progress would advance to the point where many of the miracles claimed by religion would become realities of technological capability. Death would be abolished once biotechnology delivered the ways and means of ending ageing and disease. Nobody would want for anything, because all material desires would be granted thanks to the ability to reassemble molecular feedstocks with atomic precision, while more fantastical desires would become possible once our minds were uploaded into simulations overseen by godlike machine intelligences. And, speaking of 'godlike intelligences', some even speculated that superintelligences would achieve such power over and understanding of material reality, they would be able to create new universes, something theoretical physicists like Alan Guth (b 1947) had speculated was theoretically possible, albeit only if you could wield energies far beyond anything remotely possible today.

Some, or maybe even all of these scenarios might strike you as unbelievable. But for some Singularitarians such skepticism was based on an obvious flaw: Such doubters were basing their assumptions on what mere human intelligence can realistically achieve. But once superintelligence has been created and The Singularity has happened, all this would become quite possible because technology would have evolved into something that is, for all practical intents and purposes, God.

According to the technological historian David Noble (1945-2010), this mixture of science and religion has always been a feature of Western materialism. "I look at space technology, artificial intelligence, cyberspace and genetic engineering as all essentially religious projects...In the United States, Von Braun, the Nazi rocket scientist who was brought here, he became a born again Christian who argued that human beings must go into space as part of their cosmic destiny to spread the gospel. The astronauts have carried literally thousands of Christian banners, flags, copies of the Bible etc into space with them in their space suits. So the religious ethos of the space program is, I think, undeniable".

With regards to the human genome project, Noble remarked, "Francis Collins, who runs it, is a born-again Christian...'The' human genome doesn't really exist, because everyone's genome is different. And when asked 'who's genome will it be?', they said, "well, it will be sort of a composite, and it will be male, sort of an Adam 2'".

This referral to some sort of sequel to Biblical events is what the West has always been trying to achieve, according to Noble:

"Technological development, which appears to be the most worldly of activities, is in actuality an other-worldly project rooted in the Christian notion of redemption, the restoration of original perfection. And the story, which is a peculiarly Christian one, is the story of the fall of

Adam, and the promise of the recovery of Adam's original divinity...Science is the ultimate authority in our culture, and scientists cultivate the image that they stand between mortals and God, and that they are the new clergy, so to speak".

In all likelihood, therefore, religion will not simply 'go away' but will instead evolve as our need to believe in something greater than our daily reality adapts to changing circumstances, just as it has adapted throughout the life of our species.

The Purpose of Religion

We'll leave speculations regarding what form religion may evolve into, and return to the idea of particular religious beliefs continuing for as long as they 'work'. Today, when asked what purpose religion serves, I would say that people would typically cite the following explanations. Religions offer hope that death is not the end of existence. Religions offer explanations to questions regarding the nature of reality. Religions offer moral guidance.

To the likes of Richard Dawkins, religious myths about gods placing 'lights in the sky, or creating the human race from the ground-up teeth of a vanquished rival god, are all merely the sort of 'explanations' primitive people dream up when they haven't yet discovered science. In his book 'The God Delusion', Dawkins seeks to show that invoking gods to explain anything in the natural world is actually no explanation at all. Saying God created life is about as useful as saying 'God knows how life began!'. Indeed, it's a lot less honest than what amounts to saying 'We don't know how life began'. Because the god concept is so flexible, it can be made to fit with whatever evidence we happen to have. Nothing can falsify such a flexible concept and that means it is not wrong, but, what is worse, not even wrong.

As well as setting out to show that religious explanations are worse than useless at telling us anything informative about the natural world, Dawkins also seeks to debunk the belief that religion is the source of, and effective guide to, moral behaviour and a system of ethics.

Now, whether or not he actually succeeds in demonstrating the falsity of these beliefs is arguably less interesting than the result he presumably thinks must follow once these falsities have been established. Should his arguments persuade someone, the result should be that this person would not only abandon their current faith but abandon all religious belief. After all, he thinks, if his arguments are persuasive, then Dawkins will have removed the very foundations upon which all religions are built. There would be no point in seeking alternatives, as the whole thing would have been exposed as a lie.

The flaw in this line of thinking is one of making the assumption that what it means to say religion 'works' never alters. But, in 1917 a German historian of religion by the name of Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) wrote a book called 'The Idea of the Holy', and in it he argued that seeking to explain the origins of the world or establishing a basis for ethical behaviour were not actually the concerns of early religious people. Instead, the most fundamental and basic assumption is "the sense of the Numinous", which is to say, a feeling that the material world is not all there is to reality; that there is also a hidden, spiritual aspect, a holy quality. Had a committed atheist tried to convince these people that their sense of the Numinous had no scientific or analytical philosophical justification, they would not have cared for such details were of no concern.

When we talked about Hobbes' time in Book Five, we saw how 17th century philosophy thought of the world in 'mechanical' terms. For scientists like Galileo, progress in 'physics' (which was originally a compression of 'Physical Sciences') could only be made if contemplations of mind, souls and spirits were brushed aside, and all the focus was on material elements purposelessly pushed, pulled, combined and disassembled by natural forces. In Galileo's case, this did not equate to a belief that God, souls and spirituality did not exist, only that such things could not be quantified and were therefore not appropriate for physics studies.

However, as science developed from the 17th century onwards, the culture it fostered continued to encourage focusing on the physical, material world, and along the way the attitude became not one of believing the spiritual was hidden from the light of scientific inquiry but rather one that insisted it did not really exist at all. The material world, brought into being by mindless, purposeless forces, is all there is.

So, for example, no book written about the origins of life ever makes any mention of spirit animating the flesh, or if such things are written about, it will be made clear that such suppositions belong to a pre-scientific age. Instead, the explanation will be that long, long ago there was a 'primordial soup' of chemicals. Some of those chemical reactions accidentally stumbled upon autocatalytic reactions, and from this heredity got underway which, after billions of years of purposeless natural selection, there arose systems of astonishing functional complexity that we identify as 'alive'. At no stage in this development of life is there any cause to hypothesise about spirits or 'mana' or anything like that. Equally, consciousness is often 'explained' as being an epiphenomenon of completely materialist and natural brain activity. There are no souls. We are made of meat and that is all there is to us.

I think it's fair to say, though, that most people are uncomfortable with accepting that this is really 'all that I am'. No matter how hard materialist science seeks to edit out any sense of the holy or the spiritual, it seems to be intrinsic to being human to believe in more than the objective, quantifiable reality deemed to be the only appropriate area of study for physics. We have a need to believe in more than just the world that is revealed to us via the senses and empirical study.

For our long-distant ancestors, there was no call or desire to edit out the holy. Quite the opposite, actually. For people in more traditional societies, this sense of the numinous is pervasive throughout every level of society, accepted as a part of life just as much as the warmth you feel on your skin on a hot summer's day, or the chill in your bones on a dark winter's night. Different groups made up different names for this hidden yet all pervasive aspect of existence. The word 'Numinous' is derived from the Latin belief in 'Numina' (or 'spirits'). For South Sea Islanders, there was a belief in a mysterious force they named 'Manna'.

For these reasons, the sheer flexibility of religious thinking and the fact that it fits very well with our innate rejection of a totally material world and desire to believe in something greater than our mundane lives, I think it's fair to say that religion will continue to evolve, but it will never die. I don't know how popular atheism is. My suspicion is that not many of us who don't think of ourselves as religious are really atheists, but rather agnostic, either unsure (or

don’t care whether) God exists or not. If atheism is not a popular belief system, then I suppose belief in the idea that religion will one day expire (when little evidence points to that being likely) can’t be classified as a mythstake. But, certainly, there is a great deal of evidence to show religion won’t die, so the ‘conflicting evidence’ part of a mythstake applies here, even if the ‘popular belief’ part does not.

Biblical People

The earliest historical accounts of religious practice come from places like Babylon, which was one of the cities built by the Sumerians, along with other cities with names like ur and Kish. In building such grand societies, and establishing the large-scale irrigation agriculture needed to sustain them, the Sumerians succeeded in establishing some of the earliest great cultures of the civilised world. In Ancient Greece, these first great civilisations were known collectively as the ‘Oikumene’, which means ‘Inhabited’.

Not long after the establishment of these early civilisations, there were invasions from people whose lifestyle would eventually require the invention of new mythologies and new gods. According to Steven Pinker, these new myths evolved among Iron Age tribes who made their living herding livestock and farming the hillsides on the southeastern periphery of Canaan. Now, Canaan is a biblical name. It refers to an area of ancient Palestine, west of the river Jordan. Eventually, scriptural traditions would portray this region as the Promised Land of the Israelites and would also take elements of Sumerian myth and, as Pinker said, “[unify them] with a shared genealogy, a glorious history, a set of taboos to keep them from defecting to foreigners, and an invisible enforcer to keep them from each other’s throats”. In short, then, the purpose of these new religious texts was to serve as a sort of code for frontier justice. These legal codes were adapted from neighbouring civilisations in the Near East, and would eventually form the texts of the oldest parts of the Hebrew Bible.

CHAPTER THREE

The Semites

Talking of the Hebrew Bible, you have no doubt heard the accusation of ‘Anti Semitism’, referring to somebody who is prejudiced against Jewish people. But, actually, the term ‘Semitic’ is a bit more wide-ranging than one that refers exclusively to the Jews. What it refers to is a family of languages that includes not just Hebrew and Aramaic but Arabic, too. As well as these languages, the adjective ‘Semitic’ also refers to languages that constitute the main subgroup of the Afro-Asiatic family of languages, namely Phoenician and Akkadian.

That last language, Akkadian, was in wide use by about 3500 BCE, making it the oldest such language for which records exist. Although it is now long extinct as an active language, the people who spoke it preserved their language in Cuneiform tablets that archaeologists would dig up thousands of years later. There were two dialects spoken by the people of Akkad, known as ‘Assyrian’ and ‘Babylonian’.

You’ve probably noticed that words such as ‘Babylon’ and ‘Cuneiform’ refer to cities and writing technologies established by the earlier Sumerian cultures. Indeed, the Akkadians adopted Sumerian language and culture after they invaded this region. Thus, the Sumerian civilisation became the Sumerian-Akkadian civilisation. Then, around 2000 BCE, the Sumerian-Akkadian civilization was conquered by the Amorites. Prior to this conquest, the Amorites had been semi-nomadic people who lived in Mesopotamia, Palestine and Syria during the 3rd Millennium BCE. After they made Babylon their capital, the Amorites became the first Babylonian dynasty. That dynasty lasted for some 500 years, but then the Assyrians, who had hitherto settled in Asher, which was a city-state built on the river Tigris, south of modern Mosul, conquered Babylon during the eighth century BCE.

The Enuma Elish

All these people- Sumerians, Akkadians, Amorites and Assyrians- contributed to the Babylonian civilisation and helped shape its mythologies, including the creation myth ‘Enuma Elish’. Here we find another one of those mythic archetypes repeated again and again in ancient cultures which would appear to have no natural counterpart. This is the chaos monster, the most famous version of which is the dragon. The Enuma Elish speaks of a battle between Marduk, the Babylonian Sun god, and Tiamat, depicted as a monstrous she-dragon, who was the mother of the earlier Babylonian gods. It’s significant that Tiamat was depicted as a dragon, because in almost any culture you care to name, such a mythological beast is a symbol of the unformed and the undifferentiated. So what Marduk is fighting against is the ever-present threat of order falling back into chaos.

Marduk eventually succeeded in slaying Tiamat, and afterwards used her body as the material with which to create the world of Men. Along with building this new world, Marduk in his role of lord of the gods of heaven and Earth also acted as the Rule Giver. He devised laws intended to preserve the order his victory had established.

It is not enough, though, to write laws down, for it is only by enacting them that they have any real meaning. And so, according to this myth, every year following Marduk’s victory, the

gods met at a certain place and there they held a form of public religious worship known as a liturgy. The place where these celestial rites were performed was, according to this myth, Babylon. In order to honour Marduk and provide a focal point for these ceremonies, the Babylonian gods set about building a great temple. This was Babylon's great Ziggurat, which is a kind of rectangular, stepped tower. Upon its completion, Marduk ascended to its summit, where a seat awaited him. As he took his seat, the other gods declared, "this is Babylon, dear city of the god, your beloved home!". With Marduk having taken his place as ruler of gods and Man, his subjects performed the New Year rituals that Babylonians would henceforth re-enact; symbolic gestures "from which the Universe receives its structure, the hidden world is made plain and the gods assigned their place in the universe".

It's worth emphasising that there was deep symbolism connected with this mythological story. According to Karen Armstrong, the Babylonians were well aware that this tale was not an attempt to provide a literal explanation for the Ziggurat's existence. That explanation was far more mundane: Their own ancestors were responsible for its construction, just as they were responsible for all of Babylon's material development. But what concerned these people was not so much the history of Babylon's material development but rather how that development could be made to endure.

In having such a desire, the Babylonians were much like most other people of the ancient world, who typically attributed cultural achievements to divine ancestors and gods. The durability of material and cultural achievements could not be taken for granted. The forces of decay and disorder were an ongoing threat that might very well undo what had been built up. The best way to ensure this did not happen, these people felt, was by partaking in the power of the divine.

And so, the assumption being made here is that the city of Babylon was imagined to be an image of heaven, a heaven whose celestial palaces had replicas here on Earth. And if political stability had been achieved, its ongoing existence could only be assured if the Babylonians participated in the more enduring and effective government of the gods. It was the New Year festival, celebrated during the month of April (or 'Nisan' to the Babylonians) that provided this link with the divine world. They were ritual gestures that served to project the participants out of profane time to the world of the gods where one could become immersed in 'Mana' or whatever sacred, numinous power was thought to underlie reality.

Again, what we have here is the assumption that the global myths have their origin in vague expressions of human hopes, fears and societal concerns. But what if this 'City of Heaven' actually had its origins in some actual celestial event witnessed by ancient peoples?

Creation of Humankind Myth

Along with a mythological tale of the establishment of cities and a battle over the forces of chaos, we find in the Enuma Elish a tale of the origins of humanity itself. This story would bare some comparisons to later religions like Christianity, while also contrasting with these religions in other respects.

In the Biblical account of the creation of the human race, "the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life: and man became a

living soul". The myth of Marduk accounts for the origins of Man in a way that, at first glance, resembled this tale. Just like the Biblical god, Marduk was said to have formed humanity out of dust.

There is a divergence between these two myths, though, in that Marduk did not just use dust to form Man. According to the Babylonian account, after having slain Tiamat, Marduk then seized Kingu, a god who had been created by Tiamat after her defeat of Apsu. Marduk killed Kingu, and then created the first man by mixing dust with the divine blood of the god he had slaughtered.

The Babylonian people would no doubt have picked up on the humour in this tale. In the Biblical account of Man's creation, Adam was said to have been made in the image of God, and stood at the pinnacle of the creative act. In contrast, this Babylonian origin myth does not portray Man as the pinnacle of creation, because the god from whose blood man was first made was one of the lowliest deities in Babylonian mythology.

Nevertheless, however stupid and ineffectual Kingu might have been, he was still a god. So, while this origin myth did place Mankind low down in the hierarchy of being from a divine point of view, it did not portray the human race as entirely separate from the gods. No, it portrayed both gods and humankind as sharing the same divine nature. In other words, there is a holistic quality to this tale, for, as Armstrong explained, "the natural world, men and women and the gods themselves all shared the same nature and were derived from the same substance". Rather than portraying the gods as existing in some separate ontological plane of existence, this tale sees no essential difference between the gods and Mankind or the Divine and the Profane.

That's not to say there was absolutely no difference between people and the gods. The gods were imagined to be far more powerful and, unlike humans, they were immortal. But, in some fundamental sense, both the natural world and the divine worlds shared the numinous, holy qualities that were believed to be ever-present. As Armstrong pointed out, "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 ascend to earth from on high. The gods and human beings shared the same predicament".

It seems that the major themes of this myth were taken up by other cultures, for we find similar stories in other places. One such example would be the myth surrounding Baal-Habaad, the Canaan god of storms and fertility. There are a couple of versions of this myth, and in one of them Baal fights and slays a seven-headed dragon known to the Canaan as Lotan. As ever, this dragon (which was known in Hebrew traditions as Leviathan) symbolised the chaos that mythological accounts of creation said pre-existed the world before order was imposed. As in the Babylonian myth, the defeat of this dragon represented a victory over the forces that threatened to drag the world back into primal formlessness.

According to Armstrong, these early religions all share the same assumption, which is that there is something divine about creativity. In many ways this continues to be the case. As she wrote, "we still use the religious language to speak of creative 'inspiration' which shapes reality anew and brings fresh meaning to the world".

Myth of the Fertility Goddess

Another similarity between the Myth of Baal and the myth of Marduk is that the other gods rewarded Baal in the same way that Marduk's victory was recognised. They built a beautiful palace in Baal's honour. But, at this point the two myths take separate paths. Whereas Marduk took his place at the top of the ziggurat, in the Canaan myth Baal dies and descends to the world of Mot, the Canaan god of death and sterility. All seems lost for Baal, for even El, the Canaan High god and his father, who comes down from his throne in an attempt to bring him back, is unable to redeem him.

All is not lost, however, because Baal's twin sister, Anat, leaves the divine realm in order to search the underworld for her twin soul. During this search she seizes Mot, smites him with her sword and then, having winnowed, burned and ground his body like corn, sows his remains into the ground. In doing so she brought new life to the soil. Later in this tale, Baal is resurrected and returned to Anat, but the details of this part of the story are sketchy due to incomplete records.

The myth of Anat had echoes in other cultures. In Mesopotamia, Babylon and Egypt we find goddesses like Inana, Ishtar and Isis taking on similar quests, searching for a dead god and bringing new life to the soil. And aspects of these myths would become part of religions that still exist today. As Armstrong pointed out, "the death of a god, the quest of the goddess and the triumphant return of 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".

CHAPTER FOUR

Who Wrote The Bible?

At this point we find ourselves talking about myths that would eventually become part of what has to be, when you take into consideration its artistic and cultural impacts, one of the most important books ever written. But, who wrote the Bible? Some copies available on the Kindle store claim the author is 'God'. Needless to say, this is no more correct than the Babylonian claim that the Ziggurat was built by 'the gods'. The Bible, like that Ziggurat, was assembled by human hands.

That collective expression, "assembled by human hands", reminds us that it's certainly wrong to go looking for a single author. That would make about as much sense as wondering who might be 'the' author of Wikipedia. Indeed, modern Biblical scholarship has established that the Bible is more of a wiki than a book. Over the course of 500 years or so, all kinds of writers from different backgrounds, with different dialects, writing styles and different conceptions of god, compiled the many tales that would eventually become the Old Testament. Along the way there was haphazard editing of earlier myths, 'corrections' that left this evolving wiki with the tell-tale contradictions, duplications and non-sequiturs that compel us to conclude that this work is indeed a sort of wiki.

But, even though overall they have many authors, wiki entries are written and edited by specific people. So, who were the people who provided the material for works like Genesis, Exodus, and the other books of the Old Testament?

Now earlier, I pointed out that, according to some Kindle versions of the Bible, God was the author. But, actually, not even the Bible itself claims such a lofty author. Instead the Bible tells us that Moses was responsible for 'Genesis', 'Exodus', 'Leviticus', 'Numbers' and 'Deuteronomy', the parts of the Bible known collectively as the 'Pentateuch' (which translates as 'Five Scrolls') and which are also the same texts that comprise the Torah. For some Orthodox Jews and evangelical Christians, the answer to the question, "who wrote the Torah/Pentateuch?', is, indeed, Moses.

But while tradition may insist that Moses wrote the Torah/Pentateuch, most scholars are not at all persuaded that this is indeed the right answer. This doubt is partly due to the fact that Moses himself is more of a legend than an historical figure; one whose story contains what are clearly literary elements rather than historical facts.

But more than that, a close study of the Torah/Pentateuch reveals strong clues that this work cannot have been that of any single author. We've been asking who wrote the Bible, but really it's certainly the case that the stories found therein would have been told orally long before anyone got around to actually writing them down. Passing on stories this way is less accurate compared to copying stories that have been written down. Think of how you retell a shaggy dog story. You almost certainly don't repeat the joke in exactly the same way it was told to you, word for word. Instead, you tell the joke in your own way, one that retains the basic gist of the setup. An even starker example would be that game in which you whisper a phrase in someone's ear, and they whisper what they thought you said in someone else's

ear, and they whisper it to someone else and so on until the last person speaks the phrase out loud, which in nearly all cases will be a complete distortion of the original phrase.

So, if the stories in the Torah/Pentateuch began as oral traditions told by many groups, we should expect to find some signs of such origins when these stories were eventually written down. Above all, it would be expected that multiple versions of the same story would crop up. This is indeed what we find in the Bible. So, for example, in Genesis 32: 27-28, we find an account of a dialogue between God and Jacob:

“And he said unto him, What is thy name? And he said, Jacob. And he said, Thy name shall no more be called Jacob, but Israel: For as a prince hast thou power with God and with men, and hast prevailed”.

Later, in Genesis 35: 9-10, we’re told:

“And God appeared unto Jacob again, when he came out of Padanaram, and blessed him. And God said unto him, Thy name shall not be called any more Jacob, but Israel shall be thy name: and he called his name Israel”.

This, then, is an example of a ‘doublet’ or a retelling of the same story, which in this case is the tale of God changing Jacob’s name to Israel. It’s hardly the only example of a doublet. In fact, some tallies count thirty such doublings in the first five books of the Bible, including major stories like the Creation account.

So, the belief that the Torah/Pentateuch had one single author- Moses- is definitely a minority view. What most scholars in the field of Pentateuch studies think is that several distinct authors were involved, and that over time multiple versions were compiled into one definitive version.

The ‘Documentary’ Hypothesis

The original version of this ‘multiple authors’ stance was formulated in the 19th century. It went by the name of the ‘Documentary Hypothesis’, and it argued that the Torah/Pentateuch was originally four different sources. Not knowing their actual names, these have been labelled as the ‘Jahwist’, ‘Eloist’, ‘Deuteronomist’, and ‘Priestly’ traditions. These labels are usually abbreviated to ‘J’, ‘E’, ‘D’ and ‘P’. According to this hypothesis, the ‘J’ tradition was the first to be written down, and this happened during the reign of Solomon, when (so the Bible tells us) the Israelites lived in a unified kingdom that was at the height of its power. Then, after the kingdom broke up, someone in the northern kingdom of Israel wrote ‘E’. As for ‘D’ and ‘P’, these stories were written down after the Jews returned from Babylon.

According to this hypothesis, ‘Deuteronomy’ was written- unsurprisingly- by ‘D’. Leviticus also had a single author, ‘P’. But Genesis, Exodus and Numbers are a mix of the ‘J’, ‘E’ and ‘P’ traditions.

It should be pointed out that there are many variations of the Documentary Hypothesis, based on disagreements over what was a single source and what was a multiple source. Was ‘D’ really a single author? Some proponents of this hypothesis think not, inclined

instead to divide ‘Deuteronomy’ into two or more sources. As for the ‘J’ and ‘E’ traditions, some now prefer to combine these into a single source.

Still, however you organise the authors of the Torah/Pentateuch, there must be some commonalities between all such variations in order for them all to be labelled as ‘The Documentary Hypothesis’. What they all have in common is the assumption that what began as multiple stories after the breakup of the united kingdom of Israel became combined to create the Torah/Pentateuch, and that this unification happened sometime around the Second Temple Period.

However, not every scholar agrees that some version of the Documentary Hypothesis has got to be true. Instead, many scholars now think that this hypothesis makes the same mistake that’s made by those who believe Moses was the author- it takes the Bible too literally.

In the case of the Documentary Hypothesis, it overlooks the fact that there is no archeological or historical support for a unified kingdom, or mighty kings called David and Solomon. Much like Moses, these are more like legendary characters than historical figures, and the Biblical account of Solomon’s reign is greatly exaggerated. Today, many scholars believe that there never really was a unified kingdom, and that strict monotheism was not practiced by the Israelites until the reign of King Josiah.

The ‘Supplementary Hypothesis’

Given these findings, many scholars have come to the conclusion that the Documentary Hypothesis needed modifying or updating. This resulted in a second theory, known as the ‘Supplementary Hypothesis’. According to this theory, the first text of the Torah/Pentateuch was actually Deuteronomy or D, and it was written down roughly when Josiah was king.

Now, bear in mind that we’re talking about which stories were first written down, not necessarily which are the earliest traditions. It seems to me there is good reason for supposing the ‘J’ tradition is the earliest. This is because this tradition depicts god as being more like the holistic deities of Pagan beliefs. Only much, much later did Yahweh become what we would think of as a monotheist god.

But, whereas the documentary hypothesis considers ‘J’ (or maybe ‘J’/‘E’) to be both the earliest traditions and the first stories to be added to the Torah/Pentateuch, the supplementary hypothesis considers ‘D’ to have been included first. According to this hypothesis, ‘D’ was written down roughly when monotheism was starting to really be pushed. Prior to this period, Israelites had really been polytheistic, worshipping many gods and only focusing on a deity like Yahweh when the times called for devotion to a god of armies. When the Assyrians conquered the north and exiles fled to Judah, strict monotheism was adopted as a way to unify those people who had come from the north with the original inhabitants of the kingdom of Judah.

The other major difference between this and the former hypothesis is that ‘J’ and ‘E’ are no longer considered to be separate sources. Instead, these are thought of as supplementary material that was added alongside ‘D’ when the Babylonian exile took place- hence the label

‘Supplementary Hypothesis’. As for ‘P’, this is considered to be additional supplementary material that was added by priests during the Second Temple Period. Also, scholars no longer believe the Torah/Pentateuch was complete once the Priestly tradition was added to it. They now believe that one more tradition, given the label ‘R’ for ‘Redactor’, added a few things here and there before the Torah/Pentateuch was completed.

As was the case with the documentary hypothesis, there are several versions of the supplementary hypothesis. But the basic gist of all of them is that, instead of there being four separate sources that were later combined, there was instead a single source to which additional or supplementary material was added over time.

The Supplementary Hypothesis is now the most popular among scholars of Pentateuch Studies, most likely because it better fits archeological records. There is, however, a new theory being developed, mostly in continental Europe. In fact, it’s so new it does not yet have a label, so I’ll just call it ‘Hypothesis III’.

Hypothesis III

Whereas the Documentary Hypothesis was brought into doubt when archeology failed to find any evidence of a unified kingdom, ‘Hypothesis III’ was formulated to explain why, whenever we try to explain how long the Israelites were in Egypt, we run into several chronological problems. What this new hypothesis suggests is that there were originally two origin myths told by the Ancient Israelites. It would not be surprising if this were the case, because such tales came from a time when stories of the past were more myth and legend than historical reality, so it would not be surprising if people living in separate chiefdoms would tell different origin stories.

Anyway, one of those origin myths was based on the legend of Moses and the Exodus. According to Hypothesis III, Deuteronomy, which is clearly based on the Moses tradition, was written down first. While Deuteronomy was being written down there were fragments of texts, some of which were older than ‘D’, others which were not written until after ‘D’, but all just kind of floating around, not written into the Torah/Pentateuch. Some of these fragments were based on the Moses tradition, but others were based on a separate origin myth.

This other tradition was centred around the three Patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. These two traditions- Moses and the Exodus, and the Three Patriarchs- were literary traditions that remained separate and developed independently of each other.

It was not until sometime during the Second Temple Period that a group of priests from Jerusalem worked to bring these narratives together. Hence, Hypothesis III believes that it was only during the ‘Priestly’ or ‘P’ tradition that these once separate origin tales were combined into a single narrative. It’s thought that these priests took fragments of texts from both the Patriarchs’ story and the Moses story (the sections prior hypotheses had labelled ‘J’ and ‘E’) and inserted these into their own texts which, for obvious reasons, are labelled ‘P’. At some later stage, the ‘Redactor’ added a few more bits, put the Book of Deuteronomy at the end, and there it was: the final Torah/Pentateuch.

Does Hypothesis III provide the definitive version of how the Torah/Pentateuch was put together? Perhaps, but then again, perhaps not. Maybe we'll never figure out the exact order in which a bunch of separate myths, legends and historical retellings, passed by word of mouth and no doubt modified by different cultural perspectives, were eventually pieced together to produce what we now call the Torah/Pentateuch.

But what we can say, because it's now so strongly supported by evidence, is that Biblical scholars got the history of Ancient Israel backwards. Going by a literal interpretation of Biblical texts, one is led to believe that Ancient Israel began as a unified kingdom that was divided at a later date. However, through a combination of literary analysis and archeological findings, we've come to realise that, actually, the Israelites were originally two separate nations. Rather than unification happening during the time of David and Solomon, it actually did not take place until the days of Hezekiah and Josiah, after the Assyrians destroyed the North and forced the people to flee to southern Judah.

Creation of a People

The writing styles of 'J' and 'E' suggest that, while Canaanites in the 8th century BCE continued to share the religious perspectives of their Middle-eastern neighbours, a vision that was distinctly their own was also starting to develop. For example, when 'J' composed an origin myth, he was evidently not all that interested in any sacred, mythological pre-history. His origin myth begins at a time when "there was as yet no wild bush on Earth nor had any wild plant sprung up, for Yahweh God had not sent rain on 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".

That is all 'J' thinks needs be said about the world before the first man, because 'Yahweh's creation of the first man is briefly described in the very next sentence. The rest of prehistory is dealt with in a similarly perfunctory manner, as 'J' races through this part of the story in order to get started on the topic that really interests him, which is the history of the people of Israel.

Here we see a marked difference with those earlier, Pagan writers in Mesopotamia and Canaan, who tended to treat history as feeble and insubstantial, with the sacred, primordial time of the gods a far more important topic. J's approach also differs from that of Greek thought, whose philosophers tended to approach their topics from an ahistorical perspective.

This change, from interest in the primordial time of the gods, to an interest in the history of one's people, is not the only difference noticeable in J's creation story. His account of Man's origin also has significant differences compared to the account given in the 'Enuma Elish'. Here is what he wrote:

"Yahweh God fashioned Man of dust from the soil. Then he breathed into his nostrils the breath of life and thus Man became a living thing".

At first glance, rather than demonstrating a clear contrast with earlier myths, this account of Man's origins appears to continue such assumptions. After all, the idea of Man being formed from the dust of the Earth had previously been raised in the Babylonian myth.

A second look, however, reveals the crucial difference. In the ‘Enuma Elish’, man’s creation involved mixing dust with the blood of a god. In J’s account, though, no divine essence is used in Man’s creation. The name of this First Man reminds us of his origins, lowlier than that of the First Man in earlier, Pagan myth. His name is ‘Adam’, which J’s contemporaries would have recognised as a pun, one related to the word ‘Adamah’, meaning ‘Soil’. ‘Adam’- Man- belongs to the Earth. So, not only does J write like he is far less interested in mythological prehistory, he also writes like he believes there is more of a distinction between the world of Men and the world of the Divine.

Another Fertility Myth

It takes a People to make history, rather than one or two individuals. The history of the people of Israel starts with somebody called ‘Abram’ (meaning ‘Father of height or exultation’) later to be renamed ‘Abraham’. This renaming tells us that Abram/Abraham played a role not dissimilar from older fertility myths. You see, Abraham means ‘Father of a multitude’. In J’s account, Yahweh informs Abraham that he is to migrate to Canaan where he is to fulfil a special destiny. He is to become father of a mighty nation, one whose population will surpass even the number of stars in the night sky. The descendants of Abraham, Yahweh tells him, will one day come to possess the land of Canaan as their own.

But who was this ‘Abram’? In monotheistic scripture, ‘Adam’ may have been the first man, but it is Abraham who is the spiritual ancestor of Jews, Christians and Muslims. That’s why these religions are sometimes described as ‘Abrahamic’; they all trace their origins back to this patriarch. As far as Judaism is concerned, Abraham was the founding father of the special relationship between the Jews and God. In the Christian religion, he is the spiritual progenitor of both Jewish and Gentile believers. Islamic religion portrays him as part of a chain of prophets linking the final prophet (Muhammed) to the first (Adam).

When J begins his ‘history’ of the Israelites, Abraham is still Abram, living with his family in what is now Eastern Turkey. The family did not always live here. J informs us that Abram’s father, Terah (‘delay’) was a pagan who originally came from the Mesopotamian city of Ur.

As for what Biblical scholars think, their study of scripture leads them to suppose that Abram was one of the wandering chieftains who, at the end of the third millennium BCE, took their people out of Mesopotamia and headed towards the Mediterranean. According to Egyptian and Mesopotamian sources, these wanderers were known as the ‘Habiru’ or ‘Apiru’, which were Akkadian words for ‘Dusty’ or ‘Dirty’. The term ‘Habiru’ is used in 2nd millennium BCE texts from the Fertile Crescent, and are typically used in reference to rebels, mercenaries, labourers and outlaws.

That last category particularly marks such wanderers out as folk outside of society. But, actually, chieftains like Abram could not really be classified as true nomads. They were not like the Bedouin , truly nomadic desert folk who never stayed anywhere long, compelled to migrate with their flocks according to the cycle of the seasons. For the most part their cultural status was considered to be higher than that of the desert folk, but other than that classifying them proved to be immensely challenging. Because of this difficulty in pigeonholing them, they were often in conflict with conservative authorities.

But, not all Habiru became rebels and raiders. Some became government employees, or merchants, some of whom acquired sufficient riches to be able to buy land of their own and settle down. The Book of Genesis portrays Abraham as a mercenary under the service of the King of Sodom. He is portrayed as having frequent conflicts with the Canaanite authorities, as well as those in charge of the districts surrounding it.

One more thing we know from Mesopotamian and Egyptian sources is that Chieftains like Abraham spoke West Semitic languages, one of which is Hebrew. Going by what we can tell from Biblical sources, it seems as though, from 1800 to 1200 BCE, there were three main waves of Hebrew settlement in Canaan. Abraham himself was associated with the first wave. His grandson, Jacob, is linked with the second wave of Hebrew settlement. After having been renamed Israel (which means 'may God show his strength') he settled in what is now Nablus, an Arab town on the West Bank. The term 'Hebrew' refers to anyone who, according to Biblical tradition, is descended from Jacob. Some time between 1850 and 1200 BCE, Jacob sired sons who were themselves the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel. At first they lived in Canaan, but when a severe famine struck the area they emigrated to Egypt.

Finally, around 1200 BCE, a third wave of Hebrew migrants arrived in Canaan from Egypt. These people claimed to be descendants of Abraham and that they had been enslaved by the Egyptians. Their liberation, they claimed, was due to a deity they called 'Yahweh', the god of their leader, Moses. Having fought their way into Canaan, this last wave of settlers allied themselves with the Hebrews that had already settled. They became known as the people of Israel. The people known to us as the ancient Israelites were, according to the Bible, a confederation of ethnic groups of various kinds. What bound them together was, more than anything else, the loyalty they felt toward the god of their leader, Moses.

CHAPTER FIVE

Yahweh's Beginnings

Returning to the settlement that Abraham is said to have been involved in, you'll recall that chapter twelve of J's account begins with Yahweh issuing a command, which is to leave Haran and migrate to Canaan. Here, too, we can detect a difference in the relationship between Abraham and his god, compared to what was typical in ancient Middle Eastern tradition. As far as Babylonians and Cannanites were concerned, gods like Marduk or Baal were not expected to directly take part in the everyday lives of people. No, these were deities whose actions had been performed in sacred time. Yahweh, in contrast, was imagined to be directly involved in historical events. As Armstrong pointed out, "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".

Now, when we first encountered the name 'Yahweh', this deity was referred to as the God that Moses and his followers worshipped. The way the story has been presented so far implies that this was also the god that Abraham worshipped. After all, it is 'Yahweh' who issued the command to head for Canaan, not El or Marduk.

But, actually, we cannot be certain that Abraham did worship the same god as Moses. Biblical sources are not much help in shedding light on this puzzle, because the texts provide conflicting answers to the question 'which god did Abraham worship?'. In Moses' myth, when God appears in the form of a burning bush, he explains to Moses that he really is the same god that Abraham had worshipped. Why did god feel this was a point that needed clarifying? The implication is that, prior to 'Yahweh' appearing to Moses, no Israelite had ever heard of him. But if we return to the story told by J, here we are told that Man had worshipped Yahweh since the time of Adam's grandsons Enoch and Enosh. If that were so, then Moses really should have known who Yahweh was.

Furthermore, in J's account, Abraham's god is referred to throughout as 'Yahweh'. But, in the text written by a source we refer to as 'Priestly' or 'P', dated to the 6th century BCE, when God appears to Moses, he says that Abraham had called him 'El Shaddai' and that the divine name 'Yahweh' was not known to him. 'El Shaddai', 'Yahweh', are these two different names for the same god, or are we actually talking about two different deities?

To we moderns, the Abrahamic religions are most definitely monotheistic. But that is what Judaism later became and we should not presume that Abraham or any of the Patriarchs of Israel were true monotheists. A sure sign that they were not monotheists can be found in one of the Old Testament's most famous legends, the tale of Moses receiving the Ten Commandments. Notice how, in this list of things a faithful people must not do, priority was given to not following other deities. "I, the LORD God, am a jealous God". There would be no point making such commandments for true monotheists who, after all, do not believe in the existence of more than one god. Rather than think of ancient Israelites as monotheists, then, it's almost certainly more accurate to consider them as pagans whose religious beliefs overlapped with those of their Canaanite neighbours. Like them, the Hebrew pagans would have believed in gods like Marduk and Baal.

Furthermore, consider the name that ‘Yahweh’ tells Moses Abraham had known him by. ‘El Shaddai’ meant ‘El of the Mountain’, which was one of the traditional names of El, the Canaanite High god. In all likelihood, then, not only did these pagan Hebrews believe in Canaanite gods like Baal, Abraham also worshipped El. That’s probably why the name of this Canaanite High god became preserved in Hebrew names such as Isra-el and Ishma-el.

Canaan Epiphanies

Another way in which Abraham’s god bares more resemblance to Pagan deities than later conceptions of the Monotheist god can be seen in stories about the relationship between Abraham and El. Earlier, it was said that the gods of Pagan antiquity were not expected to have any direct involvement in the lives of mortals. That does not mean to say, however, that such gods were entirely remote because, in Pagan religions, the concept of the ‘Epiphany’, in which a god assumes human form and appears to certain privileged people, was considered to be a fairly normal event.

In later religions, if God did appear in front of someone, this would have been regarded as a startling experience, enough to make that person prostrate themselves on the ground in awe and terror. But the far more mundane epiphanies of Pagan religions suited the holistic nature of such beliefs. As Armstrong explained, “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”.

These sort of mundane epiphanies were a feature of J’s writings. At Hebron in Canaan there was a religious site, one that originally focused on a holy tree. According to J’s story, Abraham had pitched his tent under that tree. At some point during the hottest part of the day, he noticed three strangers approaching. Knowing full well what was expected of a polite person in Middle Eastern society, he insisted that the three came and rested in his tent. A conversation ensued over a meal, and during the course of this chat it is revealed, in a way that is not at all surprising to anyone, that one of these strangers is actually El, Abraham’s god. As for the other two, it turns out that they are angels. This is not the only occasion in which God just shows up. When the Israelites looked back to their own golden age, they thought the Patriarchy had had a relationship with their god that was not much different to that between a man and a leader of men, such as a sheik.

By the 8th century BCE, if you were an Israelite you would have very much disliked the idea that one could have such a mundane and intimate relationship with your god. E, the other earliest source of Biblical texts, was a contemporary of J who lived in the Kingdom of Israel. In his account, whenever the Patriarchs have dealings with god, such exchanges entail more distance between mortal man and his deity. God does not turn up for lunch in the guise of a stranger; he prefers to speak through an angel. J, though, lived in the kingdom of Judah, and it seems people in this part of Canaan had not yet rejected the idea of epiphanies as conceived of in ancient Paganism.

The Biblical Kings

Before getting into Yahweh's evolution from one deity among many others to a strictly monotheist god, I want to give a quick run-through of the supposed history of the Israelite people.

As we have seen, from a Biblical perspective, the Israelite's history really began when Abram, who was probably a chieftain originally from Mesopotamia, journeyed towards the Mediterranean and, along with several other groups who made such journeys, eventually formed tribes and chiefdoms that herded livestock and farmed hillsides on Canaan's southeastern periphery. The 'Canaanites' did not quite refer to a single group, but rather to a Semitic language-speaking group belonging to different ethnicities. As for the people who would become known as the 'Israelites', they originated around a region that now covers the territories of countries like Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, although back in 1200 BCE this region was known as the Southern Levant. Over time, many different names would be used in reference to the Israelite homeland, but in all such cases what is being referred to are the same group of people living in distinct kingdoms over the centuries.

While the first wave of Hebrew settlers were associated with Abram/Abraham, the second wave were associated with Jacob. He would later adopt the name 'Israel' ('May God show his strength') and it was his people who would eventually become known as the 'Israelites'.

About 1200 BCE, the Bronze Age collapsed, and many civilisations were brought down as well. We don't really know why this collapse happened, but historians have put forward a few plausible possibilities. Perhaps invaders came along who had superior military strategies and more sophisticated equipment, and the entire area crumbled under this force? Or, maybe the catastrophe had more natural causes, such as climate changes resulting in poor crop harvests?

Speaking of weather conditions and poor crops, the descendants of Jacob/Israel lived in tribes around Canaan at first, but when a severe famine affected the area, they were once again forced to move on. According to their legends, these people emigrated to Egypt, and upon entering that kingdom were enslaved by the Pharaoh, who was nervous about the scale of immigration his country was experiencing.

The third wave of Hebrew migrants to arrive in Canaan turned up at the end of the Late Bronze Age, in 1200 BCE. This particular wave distinguished itself from those already inhabiting this area in one major respect. All the other settlers were heavily influenced by the larger, Canaanite religion, and indeed such influences would shape Biblical history up to the time of the Prophets and beyond. In particular, Abraham and most of his descendants held polytheistic beliefs, and adopted many of the old Canaan gods as their own.

What made the third wave of settlers so different from other cultures in the Levant at the time, was that they lent towards a kind of monotheism. That is not to say they believed in the existence of just one god. In fact, their myths and legends featured multiple deities. It's just that, by the time they settled in Canaan circa 1200, they had organised their belief system around a legendary figure called Moses, who was able to liberate his people thanks to the help of a god called 'Yahweh'. So, their form of monotheism consisted of worshipping a

particular god, imagining this deity to be a jealous god of armies who demanded fierce, exclusive loyalty from his chosen people.

Now, you'll have noticed that Moses was referred to as a legendary figure rather than an historical one, and that I began this chapter by referring to the "supposed" history of the Israelites. This is not just because fantastical feats are attributed to the figure of Moses, such as the parting of the Red Sea, but because there is no evidence beyond Biblical references to verify his ever existing. In that respect, Moses was not alone, because no Biblical Israeli figure, up until 885 BCE, can be verified as having actually existed.

Does that mean to say that characters like Abraham, Jacob/Israel, Moses and David never really existed? No, it just means we cannot be as certain of their existence as we are a character like Alexander the Great, who figures in so many different historical and archeological records. We can, however, say for sure that some of the feats attributed to these Biblical figures were surely exaggerations, because they certainly would have made more of an historical impact had such events really happened.

What historical and archeological records do tell us is that the Canaanites began as tribes and groups of nomads, but over time they grew and developed into a series of city-states around what is now modern Israel and Syria. This development took place during the late Iron Age, which occurred from around 1000 BCE to 600 BCE. What helped this expansion from tribes and chiefdoms to city-states and kingdoms was favourable climatic conditions. Along with the temperate conditions there came fruitful harvests, which in turn spurred a population boom, and a massive one at that. As a result, more and more settlements popped up throughout the area, and trade routes started to move exotic goods into the larger settlements.

The First King

But, up until 1033 BCE or thereabouts, none of the twelve tribes of Israel lived in a kingdom. Instead, legend has it that, prior to 1033, the Israelite tribes were semi-ruled by a series of judges. I say 'semi-ruled' because these tribal chiefs (the most famous of which was Samson, of 'Samson and Delilah' fame) appear not to have been permanent rulers, but rather temporary leaders who led armies during times of crisis. According to the Bible, the people eventually grew tired of this system and yearned for a more stable form of leadership. So, after having drawn lots, the people elected Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin, to be king.

When Saul was anointed king by the judge Samuel, some time around the eleventh century BCE, this is traditionally thought of as the time when Israel transitioned from a scattered tribal society to an organised statehood.

At this point in the Biblical account, we arrive at the beginning of what's known as the 'United Kingdom', so-called because all twelve tribes of Israel were united under king Saul. However, from an historical point of view we have no reason to believe there ever was such a United Kingdom or that leaders like Saul were the mighty kings they were made out to be. Rather, at this time, there were a bunch of small Israelite villages without a centralised government. If figures like Saul actually existed, they would have been more like tribal chiefs than mighty kings.

King David

The Saul of legend, however, certainly was mighty. It is said that, centuries before Saul became king, at a time when the Israelites had fled from Egyptian oppression, they had been harassed by a people known as the Amalekites. This led to a bloody command from none other than Yahweh himself, which was to “wipe out the name of Amalek”. Upon being made king, Saul is reminded of this command by Samuel, who tells him, “now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass”. The first king of the Israelites carries out these orders, but it’s not quite the total genocide that those orders demanded, for he spares Agog, the Amalekites’ king. This rare act of mercy infuriates Samuel, who “hewed Agog in pieces before the Lord”.

Among Saul’s subjects there was a shepherd boy: David, a name which is often used today to represent victory in the face of a seemingly invincible opponent. As well as gaining fame from killing the Philistine’s champion, Goliath, he would also be remembered as the writer of the Psalms (at least, that’s what tradition would have us believe).

Having slain Goliath, David became a favourite of Saul and also formed a close friendship with Jonathon, who was one of the king’s sons. It turns out, though, that David is rather good at this killing business, and this success ends up making King Saul jealous. Using the good name he earned from slaying Goliath, David recruited a gang of guerillas, and their exploits impressed the ladies of the king’s court who sang, “Saul has killed by the thousands but David by the tens of thousands”. Having been made green with envy, and driven to paranoid fears that David plotted to usurp the throne, Saul attempted to kill him. This assassination attempt failed, but being the focus of the king’s wrath understandably compelled David to go into hiding.

During this time, which lasted for several years, David effectively operated as a fugitive. But then, when David was thirty years old, the thing that Saul feared would happen came to pass. While battling against the Philistines, both Saul and Jonathon were killed. With both the King and the heir apparent lost, there was bitter disagreement over who should be crowned. All but one of the twelve tribes wanted Ish-Bosheth (1011-1004 BCE) who was Saul’s only remaining son, to be the next king, but the tribe of Judah preferred David, who was one of their own. This disagreement degenerated into a civil war that lasted for seven years. But then Abner, who was Saul’s first cousin as well as his main general, decided to support David. Not long after Abner switched sides, Ish-Bosheth was killed by his own men. So, around 1004 BCE, David became King.

As Monarch, he kept up his reputation for mass slaughter. It is said that Joab, his general, “wasted the country of the children of Ammon” and that when the country was defeated, David “brought out the people that were in it, and cut them with saws and with harrows of iron and with axes”.

Another nation that David successfully conquered was Judah. After capturing Jerusalem and having absorbed the southern tribes of Judah, Jerusalem became the capital of a kingdom that, if you believe the Biblical stories, grew into an empire that stretched from the Euphrates

to the Red Sea. King David's people were symbolised by a six-pointed star which, thousands of years later, would still be remembered as a religious symbol, one arguably as important as the symbol of the crucifix. And, talking of the device that Jesus was said to have been executed on, Christians revered king David too, believing him to be a forerunner of none other than Christ Himself.

Eventually, though, events conspired against David, such that his legitimate heir, Adonijah, never ascended to the throne. These events began when David took a walk on the palace roof, and this vantage point gave him the opportunity to peeping-Tom a naked woman, whose name was Bathsheba. Taking a fancy to this woman, King David wanted to add her to his harem, but there was a slight problem: Bathsheba already had a husband. David's solution was to send her husband to certain death in battle. Having rid himself of the husband problem, David added Bathsheba to his harem and, after using her body as his own property, she became pregnant with Solomon. David fell into senility in his old age, and Bathsheba took advantage of his confused state of mind and had her son, Solomon, anointed as King rather than David's older son, Adonijah.

King Solomon

The reign of King Solomon is estimated to have begun around 970 BCE. Evidently, the new King inherited his father's taste for feminine pleasure, for it is said his harem consisted of seven hundred princesses and three hundred concubines. This might explain why fewer homicides were attributed to Solomon than his predecessors- he was occupied with other matters!

King Solomon did not spend all of his time among the ladies of his harem, for he was also responsible for the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem, where the ark of the Covenant containing the laws handed down from Yahweh to Moses, was kept. As well as building the Temple of Solomon, tradition regards him as the author of the books Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Solomon.

But of all the things King Solomon is remembered for, one stands above all others, and that is his eponymous wisdom. Even today, anyone demonstrating a clear sense of justice may be praised with the saying "he has the wisdom of Solomon". But what did this king do in order to earn such long-lasting recognition?

Well, the story is that two prostitutes who shared a room both fell pregnant. Each one gave birth within days of the other, but unfortunately one of those newborns died soon after. That left one surviving boy, and both women claimed to be his mother. This dispute came before the king, who chose a rather gruesome threat to determine who was really his mother. Solomon pulled out his sword and threatened to hack the child in two, so that each alleged mother could possess a share of the butchered baby. When one of the women withdrew her claim rather than see the infant hewed with the king's sword, King Solomon awarded the baby to her. According to Kings 3, 23-28, "when all Israel heard the verdict the king had rendered, they stood in awe of the king, because they saw that he had divine wisdom in carrying out justice".

Solomon is said to have died in 931 BCE, whereupon his son, Rehoboam, became king. Rehoboam was not the sort of king who inspired admirable legends. Whereas his father was regarded as a wise leader, King Rehoboam was a very foolish young man, and during his reign civil war broke out. The result of this conflict was the splitting of Israel into two kingdoms. Henceforth, Jerusalem would be the capital of the southern kingdom of Judah, while the northern kingdom retained the name Israel, and its capital was Sumeria. The amalgamation of Israel and Judah, which began in the reign of King David, was at an end. Henceforth, the heirs of King Rehoboam would rule over Judah alone.

Back in 931, thanks to Rehoboam's reign seeing the splitting of Israel into the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah, the lines of kings that followed were necessarily split in two. We'll follow the kings of the northern kingdom first, and then we'll look into the kings (and one queen) who ruled over Judah after the reign of Rehoboam (931-913).

Rulers of the Northern Kingdom.

Whereas the tribes of Benjamin and Judah continued to be ruled by the House of David in Jerusalem, the ten remaining tribes declared independence and formed the kingdom of Israel, with its capital of Samaria , in the north. The first king, who ruled from 931 to 910, was somebody called Jeroboam. He came from the largest of the twelve tribes, which was Epraim. Following his death in 910, his son Nadab ascended the throne. His reign lasted only two years, cut short after he was assassinated by one of his army captains, a man named Baasha. He then took the throne, ruling from 908 until 896.

At this point, the history of the northern kingdom developed a pattern. After Baasha's reign ended, his son, Elah, became king. But then King Elah suffered the same fate that befell Jeroboam's son. Not long after becoming king, he was assassinated by Zimri, who was one of his army commanders. He took the throne in 885, but only briefly. Zimri found it impossible to hold on to power and, after being king for a mere seven days, committed suicide.

After Zimri's death the Northern Kingdom descended into civil war, with the people divided over who should be the next king. Tibni (885-880) who was probably a relative of Zimri, was the preference for some. Others, though, supported Omri (885- 874) who, we think, came from the tribe of Issachar, as had Baasha and Elah. The civil war ended when Team Omri won and their man became sole king of Israel.

Now, from a biblical perspective, Omri was not a particularly noteworthy king, and certainly nothing like as legendary a figure as David or Solomon. But, in historical terms, he is important for one reason. This is the first king whose existence is recorded in something other than Biblical texts. If you go to the Louvre in Paris, you can find an ancient artefact known as the 'Mesha Stele'. It came from Moab (which today is a part of Jordan) and it dates to a few decades after Omri's reign. It contains a description of King Omri.

As I said, in Biblical terms king Omri was not all that significant. His successor, Ahab (874-853) however, was a significant Biblical figure and his wife, Jezebel, even more so.

Jezebel is a pretty interesting character from a literary point of view. It's one of those names that carries certain connotations, much like calling someone a 'Jonah' to imply bad luck

follows them around, or ‘Job’ if they exhibit extraordinary patience. In the case of ‘Jezebel’, it can be a derogatory term aimed at women who act as evil seducers. This label originated in the popular representation of Jezebel as having influenced her husband Ahab into doing wicked things, namely turning away from the cult of Yahweh and worshipping false gods.

But not everyone agrees that Jezebel should be portrayed in such a negative light. From a feminist perspective there is something highly dubious about this trope of the evil seductress. After all, what is it really, other than a nasty stereotype used to bring down women who have grown a bit too strong-willed for their misogynistic societies? Those wanting to clear her name now see Jezebel as something of a feminist icon.

The legend of Jezebel the evil seducer also serves as a reminder that such tales were mostly handed down to us long after reformers rewrote Israelite history, rewriting the Books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings to ensure Yahweh became a god leading a holy war against the Canaanites and other followers of Paganism. In particular, much of what we’re told about the northern kingdom does not come from accounts of folks who actually lived in that area when such events supposedly took place. No, they were primarily written and edited much later, by scribes who came from the southern kingdom of Judah. This is the main reason why such tales are so biased towards monotheist religion, because such a religion was developing in Jerusalem at this time.

However, the Biblical tales clearly show how, during the time of prophets like Elijah and Jeremiah, the followers of Yahweh were more like devotees of a cult, surrounded by Pagan cultures that had little time for monotheism. Those pagan neighbours included the northern kingdom of Israel, with Ahab and Jezebel particularly famous for preferring the cult of Baal. Since, from the perspective of the strict Yahweists to the south, these people were worshipping at the feet of false idols, there was an obvious reason why calamities would sometimes befall the kingdoms of Israel and Judah. It was all the fault of those blasphemous northerners and those in their own kingdom who broke the Covenant by “whoring after false gods”.

What happened to Ahab and Jezebel? Well, Ahab was killed during a war with the king of Judah. He was succeeded by his sons, first Ahazia, who reigned from 853 to 852, and then Jehoram, who took the throne a year later and reigned until 841. The Bible tells us that he was replaced by Jehu (841 to 814). Jezebel met her end during his reign, murdered by being pushed out of a window.

A series of father-son successions followed on from Jehu’s reign. After he died, Jehoaz became king, ruling until 798. He was followed by Jehoash who in turn was succeeded by Jeroboam II after his death in 782. Jeroboam’s reign ended with his death in 753. It was at this point that the situation in Israel really deteriorated, resulting in its destruction in 722. Two factors were primarily responsible for this calamity. The leadership of the Israelites was weakened by a series of assassinations that happened in quick succession, and with the kingdom in such an obviously fragile condition it drew the attention of a much larger and more powerful empire, eager to add countries to its collection of vassal states.

So, Zechariah took the throne after his father’s death in 753. He remained on the throne for just one year, before suffering a rather familiar fate. Yes, just like Nadab and Elah before

him, king Zechariah was assassinated and replaced by his army commander. That man, Shallum, was only king for a month before he too was assassinated and replaced with- guess what, yes- another army commander. His name was Manathem and, compared to his recent predecessors, his was a long reign, lasting the ten years from 752 to 742.

Manathem is one of those Biblical kings who, like Omri (885-874) gets mentioned in sources other than biblical texts. By the time he was on the throne, the Assyrian Empire featured in the northern kingdom's history. The Assyrian king, Tiglath Pilessar III (745-727) mentions him as someone who paid the Assyrian Empire tribute.

When Manathem died in 742 his son, Pekahia took the throne. His was another one of those short reigns, once again ended when he was assassinated and replaced by one of his army commanders, one Pekah (740-732). As with Manathem, Pekah's reign has verification in the form of a mention in Assyrian records. We also learn from such records that his reign ended in the familiar way, by his being assassinated and replaced by one of his army commanders.

That man, Hoshea, became king in 732. He would be the last king of Israel. By the time of his reign, the kingdom had been reduced to a vassal state, with his immediate predecessors both paying tribute to their Assyrian masters. Hoshea believed there was a way out of this situation, which was to make a deal with Egypt. In response, the Assyrians swept into the northern kingdom in 722, not to subjugate but to destroy. Samaria, the kingdom's capital, fell, the ten tribes were deported and they eventually effectively disappeared, having been assimilated into other cultures.

Rulers of the Southern Kingdom

The northern kingdom was no more. But the southern kingdom had not been conquered and, as we shall see, even thrived as the north collapsed. Biblical texts provide a Deuteronomist explanation for why the Judeans should have largely avoided the calamities that befell their Israelite neighbours. Generally speaking, the Bible sees the Judean kings as 'good kings', and what made them 'good' is that they encouraged the worship of the one true god and destroyed the idols of 'false gods'. The kings of Israel, though, had acted in ways entirely opposed to the Covenant with Yahweh, and the conflict and turmoil their kingdom suffered was Yahweh's just punishment.

While many of Judah's kings were 'good' from a Deuteronomist point of view, they were not all competent rulers. You may recall that, when we last talked about the kings of Judah, the famously wise Solomon had been succeeded by his son, Rehobam (931-913) whose foolish ways had led to a civil war and the splitting of the united kingdom into the two kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Actually, as we shall see later, the claim that there ever was a 'united kingdom' is a dubious one. But by the time Biblical texts were revised it was taken as given that the House of David had ruled over a mighty empire.

Anyway, Rehoboam died in 913 and was succeeded by his son, Abijah. His reign lasted only two years, but the reign of the next king, Asa, was long and peaceful, lasting from 911 until 870.

The reign of the next king, Jehoshaphat, ran from 870 to 848. This makes him a contemporary of Israel's King Ahab (874-853) and therefore also the prophet Elijah and the infamous Jezebel. In fact, there's a familial connection to those rulers of Israel, because Jehoshaphat's son, Jehoram (who reigned from 848 to 841) married a daughter of Ahab and Jezebel.

That couple provided a son, whose name was Ahazia. His reign only lasted a year. During that short reign, King Ahazia formed an alliance with his uncle, King Jehoram of Israel, in order to fight against King Aram Damascus. Ahazia died following this conflict, and the following monarch was Athalia, who ruled from 841-835.

Now, this monarch was unusual for a couple of reasons. Firstly, this was a woman, and in fact the only queen Judah ever had. Secondly, she was Ahazia's mother, which meant she was the daughter of Ahab and Jezebel and thus the only monarch of Judah who did not belong to the paternal line of David.

In fact, queen Athalia (841-835) was determined to break the line of Judah once and for all, and this she attempted to do, killing off all possible claimants to the throne (shades of King Herod, who, as anyone who has been to a Nativity knows, slew all boys aged two and under in Bethlehem "and in all the coasts thereof", when wise men from the east enquired, "where is he that is born King of the Jews?").

Athalia's plot to wipe out the line of Judah failed because a relative managed to smuggle away one of Ahazziah's sons, without the queen catching on. This infant, Joash, remained in hiding until 835. When he was seven years old, his existence was revealed to the world. With the help of the priests, he was made king and this re-established the line of Judah. Being only seven years old at the time he was obviously very young for a monarch, and would be one of two child kings to feature prominently in the Biblical story of ancient Israel.

King Joash died in 796. After his reign came the reigns of King Amaziah (796-767), Uzziah (767-740) and then Ahaz, who ruled from 732 until 716. He was a monarch who was loath to abandon the traditional Pagan gods; who encouraged his subjects to worship such deities along with Yahweh, proving that not all the rulers of Judah were 'good kings'.

Ahaz may have encouraged his people to engage in the lavish Pagan ceremonies that Isaiah would come to condemn, but the prophet did not supposedly live during his reign. No, the time of Isaiah supposedly coincided with the reign of the following monarch, who was called Hezekiah (716-687).

Now, Hezekiah was one of ancient Israel's most important kings, and the reason why he was so notable takes us back to the point about how the notion of a United Kingdom is a dubious one. We should remind ourselves that these tales were not told with a priority placed on historical accuracy. Take the claim of a Davidic empire stretching from the Euphrates to the Red Sea for example. If such an empire did in fact exist at the turn of the first millennium BCE, it left peculiarly few impressions on any other culture at that time. As Seven Pinker remarked, "no one else at the time seems to have noticed it".

As we have seen, the main purpose of such stories was to combine history and myth in such a way as to convey the right message with maximum impact. As Pinker explained, “their myths were adopted by the entire population of Canaan, unifying them with a shared genealogy, a glorious history, a set of taboos to keep them from defecting to foreigners and an invisible enforcer to keep them from each other’s throats”. Biblical scholars believe that the first draft of this narrative was composed around the mid-sixth century BCE, a time when the Judean kingdom had fallen to the Babylonians and its people forced into exile.

Historians have found evidence that, throughout the 10th and 9th centuries BCE, the southern highlands of Canaan (the one that became Judah) were divided along separate familial tribal lines. There would be no consolidation until the reign of Hezekiah. Up until his reign, the kingdom of Israel was easily the larger and more important of the two kingdoms.

What, then, should we make of this claim that there was a united monarchy ruled by a southern dynasty? The most plausible explanation is that the House of David is mere legend, a tale that was made up much, much later in order to make Judah seem more important. If David ever really existed, he was probably a tribal chieftain rather than some all-conquering leader like Alexander the Great.

Whatever is the truth about Judah’s past, we are quite certain that it was during Hezekiah’s reign that Judah’s size and importance increased. This happened because his reign began shortly after the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians and he saw that calamity as an opportunity to reorganise his kingdom. With the northern cities in ruins, many refugees were flooding into Judah, which led to a population boom. But, how safe were these people who fled to Judah seeking refuge? It would have been quite logical for the Assyrians to try and conquer the kingdom of Judah, having just destroyed their neighbours to the north.

Figuring an Assyrian attack would indeed come, Hezekiah ordered the construction of walls around the capital of Jerusalem, the remnants of which remain to this day. This turned out to be a very prudent move, because the Assyrians did indeed attack Judah during Hezekiah’s reign. This time, though, the Assyrians were not successful, and Judah went on to become the main power in the Levant for the next century.

Hezekiah died in 687 BCE and was followed by his son. Before he died, Hezekiah performed one more major work, and it was one that would be the beginning of a metaphorical pendulum swing between religious practices. This major work entailed a complete overhaul of the Judean religion. Under king Hezekiah’s direction, the central temple in Jerusalem was purified, the priesthood underwent reformation, and the practice of idolatry was attacked and idols banned.

However, this move away from Pagan worship did not last, for the next two monarchs actively encouraged the practice of syncretism; in their case worshipping Canaan gods and goddesses like Asherah alongside Yahweh. In other words, the pendulum swung away from monotheist Yahwehism towards polytheistic Canaan worship.

But then, following the assassination of the king who succeeded Manessah, the pendulum would once again swing toward monotheism. The assassination led to another child king ascending to the throne, which in this case was Josiah, who was eight years old when he

was crowned. According to Biblical legend, at some point during the eighteenth year of his reign, a 'Lost Book' of Moses' Law was apparently discovered during a restoration of the Temple, and this encouraged Josiah to purge his kingdom of any non-Yahwehist worship.

Now, from an historical perspective, two very important things happened as a result of this reformation. One was that Josiah laid the foundations of what was known as 'Second Temple Judaism', which was a very significant religion because the dominant faiths of today (Rabbinical Judaism, Christianity and Islam) all stemmed from it.

Secondly, it is believed that it was during the reign of Josiah that the original parts of Deuteronomy were written. As we have seen, the regions that the kings of Israel and Judah ruled over have always held a fundamentally important role in the creation of Biblical literature. Recall how the general belief among scholars is that the earliest Biblical authors, known only as 'J' and 'E', did their writings roughly when the Israelites divided Canaan into two separate regions, during the 8th century BCE.

However, some scholars believe that the core part of Deuteronomy is actually the earliest part of the Bible, and that this involved the creation of some legendary events and characters. It is suggested by this school of thought that the 'united kingdom' never really existed and was invented in order to give legitimacy to the idea that the 'House of David' should rule the entire land of Israel. Another 'historical' event that this school of thought doubts ever really happened was Joshua's conquest of Canaan. The accusation is that this conquest was invented so that the people of Josiah's time would be inspired to conquer the lands of the north, which were greatly weakened during Josiah's reign, having been laid waste by the Assyrians.

We don't know if any of this is true, but we do know that Josiah actually did try to conquer the northern areas. He failed in this attempt and was killed in the process. The Bible informs us that he was killed by a pharaoh named Necho. Egyptian records tell us that there was an historical Egyptian ruler with that name, and that he came to power at that exact time. More specifically, Josiah was killed in 609 BCE, and Necho's reign ran from 610 to 595 BCE.

The Judean kingdom underwent rapid decline following Josiah's death. One thing that triggered this collapse was the rise of the Neo-Babylonian empire (aka the Second Babylonian Empire) that rose to power around 626 BCE. Judah had actually prospered during the Assyrian conquest of the north, with Hezekiah successfully defending Jerusalem, and the kingdom growing as refugees from defeated Israel fled south.

But then, Assyria's ruler, Ashurbanipal, died, and this brought about a great deal of strife throughout the Neo-Assyrian Empire, to the extent that civil wars broke out. This obviously weakened the Assyrians, who were ultimately conquered by the Babylonians. Upon achieving that victory, the Babylonians became the major power in the Middle East.

Having conquered the Neo-Assyrian Empire, the Babylonian's ruler, Nebuchadnezzar, naturally claimed the kingdoms that had been turned into vassal states by the empire he had successfully conquered. But he didn't just claim to rule over the former kingdom of Israel (which had fallen to the Assyrians) but Judah too (which had not).

The majority of Judah did not consider themselves to have been reduced to subjugation by the Assyrians, and in fact the cult of Yahweh led most to believe that no force would ever defeat them. This was because the general belief among these people was that they were 'chosen'. Yahweh had selected Jerusalem as his permanent home, they believed, and so the Judeans would always hold the capital, and no-one would ever be able to conquer them.

However, there were one or two who did not share this complacent outlook. In particular, prophets like Jeremiah, who supposedly lived during the reign of Josiah and all the kings to come up to the final king of Judah, tried to show that the meaning of the term 'chosen people' had been misunderstood, the covenant with Yahweh corrupted, and that therefore the Babylonians really could conquer and defeat Judah, because Yahweh would use Nebuchadnezzar's forces as his instrument to bring divine punishment on those who "went whoring after rival gods".

According to the Bible, these prophecies of doom came true during the course of the reigns that followed that of Josiah. He was succeeded by three of his sons and one of his grandsons. Next on the throne was Jehoaz. After a year, he was replaced by Jehoiakim, who ruled from 609 to 598. Lastly, there was Zedekiah, the final king of Judah, whose reign ended in 587/586 BCE.

During the reign of these final kings, Judah suffered the humiliation and, ultimately, the total destruction that Jeremiah warned of. In fact the final king, Zedekiah, was made 'ruler' by Babylon's Nebuchadnezzar, after Jehoiakim's heir surrendered. So Zedekiah was merely a puppet king of a vassal state, and Judah was made to pay regular tribute to their conquerors. The majority of Israelites remained in Jerusalem under Babylonian rule, but being a subjugated people can only have been a profound shock, given that their faith in the cult of Yahweh had led them to believe no such defeat was possible. When that faith was shown to be wrong, Judah, which hitherto had been prosperous and heavily involved in trade, turned into a weak, disorientated nation. In fact, things became so bad that the entire infrastructure of Judah's capital collapsed, and many were forced to flee and try and make a new life elsewhere.

CHAPTER SIX

With that overview of the legendary history of the two kingdoms of Israel completed, let's now return to the mythic character said to have been the origin of that history, and of some of the major religions of the modern world.

The Meaning of 'Faith'

You will recall that J's account begins with God commanding Abraham to head for Canaan, where he will fulfil his destiny and become the father of a great nation. Abraham trusts his god's word in such matters, and in so doing proves himself to be a man of faith. This is a word that has multiple meanings. One definition centres around the concept of orthodoxy. In religious terms 'faith' in this sense means accepting a particular theological opinion on God as the correct position.

But there is also a more everyday interpretation of 'faith'. It is one we use when, for example, we have faith that our friend will keep a secret, or when we cross a bridge, having faith that it's built well enough to support our weight. When we speak of 'faith' in such circumstances, we are not referring to an intellectual ascent to a particular system of religious belief, but are instead using the word as a synonym for 'trust'. When Abraham is called a man of 'faith', this is not a reference to his orthodoxy but is instead a reference to his trust. What makes Abraham a man of faith is that he trusts that what God promises will happen will indeed come to pass, even if such claims would appear to be utterly absurd.

When God told Abraham that he was to be the father of a nation, he did not mean this in the figurative sense, like Nelson Mandela (1918-2013) being affectionately known as the father of his nation. No, he means that Abraham is destined to become a parent whose descendants will one day be numerous enough to comprise a whole nation. This was a completely ridiculous promise because Abraham's wife, Sarah, had long since gone through the menopause. Nevertheless, Abraham trusts that what his God promises will come to pass, proving himself to be a man of faith.

It turns out that Abraham's trust is not misplaced. Sarah does indeed give birth. But God is not through with testing Abraham's faith, for he soon issues another command, and an appalling one at that. He orders Abraham to sacrifice his only son.

It is stories like this that give the Old Testament a very bad reputation in the eyes of many people, including Dawkins who described its god as "a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, capriciously malevolent bully". Certainly to modern ears the very idea that a parent would even contemplate ritually killing their child is deeply abhorrent. But to contemporaries of the Pagan world, human sacrifice was far more common. Oftentimes it was believed that the first child born to parents did not owe its existence entirely to natural causes. Instead, a god had impregnated the mother, and in begetting the child had depleted some of its energy. It was believed that this depleted energy needed replenishing in order to ensure the circulation of all available mana, and this involved returning the child to its divine parent through ritual sacrifice.

Given weird beliefs like this, one might think Abraham was not all that surprised to learn he had to sacrifice his first-born. But, there is an important detail to this story that contrasts it with the normal logic behind child sacrifice in the Pagan world. Abraham's son, Isaac, was a

gift of God, rather than God's offspring. That meant there was no need for the sacrifice, because the divine energy of the gods had not been depleted. As Karen Armstrong pointed out, this detail reveals a difference in how this god was conceived, compared to most other deities of antiquity. "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".

To be sure, then, Abraham's god was making an extreme demand. Not only did it violate the logic behind sacrifices of the first-born, it also made a nonsense of Abraham's destiny, which centered, remember, on his becoming father of a nation. Nevertheless, Abraham puts all these issues aside and, once again, decides to trust his god. He very nearly carries out the sacrifice as instructed, and at the very last moment God stays his hand, revealing that the true purpose had been to test Abraham's faith and thereby determine he was truly worthy of becoming the father of a mighty nation.

What Was the Intended Message?

One has to wonder what message a story like this is meant to convey. As is the case with most stories in the Old Testament, much of the tales told about the Patriarchs are not historical accounts, but are instead either pure fiction or artistic reconstructions that bare about as much resemblance to historical figures as do Shakespearean dramas. Nevertheless, whether they were factual or not we have to suppose these stories meant something to contemporaries of J. But what?

Well, here it might help to recall Steven Pinker's summary of how the texts of the Old Testament arose. He described those texts as "a code of frontier justice" for tribes that were beginning to encroach on the cities, who probably engaged in sporadic acts of marauding and, we may suppose, even occasionally destroyed a city or two. In short these were warlike tribes, and by the time their myths had been adopted by the Canaan population, they had become unified with "a shared genealogy, a glorious history, a set of taboos to keep them from defecting to foreigners, and an invisible enforcer to keep them from each other's throats".

From such a description, it is obvious that the god of Abraham was not the deity of later monotheistic religions like Christianity or Islam, in which God is conceived of as the deity of everyone, everywhere. Instead, Yahweh was a tribal god. Furthermore, since he would also become known as 'Yahweh Sabaoth', the god of armies, it's pretty clear that this tribal god was a god of war. Now, what attribute is likely to have highest priority among tribes who worship a warrior god? Obedience to one's superiors, the willingness to carry out their orders regardless of how nonsensical they may seem at the time, trusting that the sacrifice will turn out to have meaning even if you cannot currently understand the purpose, would rank very highly in a list of attributes expected of tribal members who follow a warrior god.

Stories attributed to Yahweh and those who followed this god, including the story of Abraham's near sacrifice of Isaac, most probably conveyed the same sort of message as an anecdote retold by Dawkins. As a child he had attended a sermon in the school chapel. The preacher told a story about a squad of soldiers who were drilling near a railway line. They were given the order to march, and they obeyed. Unfortunately for them, right at the time

when he really needed to pay attention, their drill sergeant was distracted. He never gave the command to halt, and his squad, obviously well-drilled in doing only what their superiors ordered, dutifully carried on marching, right into the path of an oncoming train.

This is almost certainly not a true story, any more than most of the Old Testament stories of Patriarchs, exoduses and Jewish empires are historical accounts. But the point of the sermon was not to give a real history lesson, but rather to tell a story that conveyed a message about unquestioning obedience to authority. Both those soldiers and Abraham acted in ways that are meant to be seen as highly commendable as members of a warrior hierarchy. One can imagine tribal members in J's time hearing the story of Abraham's faith and understanding that, from the point of view of high command, you want lower ranks who will do what they are told, just like Abraham. Tribes whose lower-ranking warriors follow their own initiative, rather than the orders of their superiors, would tend to lose battles. Therefore, as Steven Pinker explained, "obedience to divine authority, not reverence for human life, was the cardinal virtue".

Moses and Yahweh

Elements of Abraham's story, as well as those from much older Mesopotamian and Egyptian myth, can be found in the story of Moses leading the people of Israel out of Egypt. Here, too, we find the sacrifice of the first-born; the first-born of Hebrew parents being spared by the angel of God (in later Biblical texts it's the angel of God who stops the sacrifice of Isaac), and many acts that have earned the god Yahweh such a bad reputation. Most famously, these include the many plagues inflicted on the Egyptians in an effort to make Pharaoh grant Moses' demands to free his people, and the Pharaoh's army being drowned when Yahweh parts the waters of the Red Sea, enabling Moses' people to cross, but then closes the waters on Pharaoh's army when they pursue them.

There have been attempts to interpret this story in a naturalistic way. Obviously the plague of locusts needs no supernatural explanation, because we know these insects do multiply into a voracious horde on occasion. As for the Nile turning to blood, it has been suggested that some sort of algal bloom may have given the Nile the appearance of turning the waters into blood. It raised toxin levels that killed the fish, but amphibians were able to leave the waters and seek out some other aquatic environment. This resulted in a plague of frogs invading Egyptian homes. Unable to find a suitable alternative home, the frogs died. Those rotting corpses attracted flies, which in turn caused a spike in painful boils, caused by the decidedly unsanitary conditions Egypt was enduring. Furthermore, it is suggested that grain had been stored and, with many families struggling and losing fathers because of the awful conditions Egypt was facing, eldest sons became the heads of households. This entitled them to a greater portion of that grain, which turned out to be a curse because it had grown toxic in storage. Younger siblings did not eat enough of the bad grain to suffer its most dire effects, but the eldest sons were digesting a lethal dose. And so, it was said, the Angel of Death came to Egypt and took away the firstborn sons of Egyptian families.

The major problem with interpreting this story in naturalistic terms is that there's no evidence to support its most important aspect, which was the Pharaoh buckling under pressure and agreeing to Moses' demands to "let my people go". Egyptian bureaucracy kept meticulous

records of various societal statistics, but historians have found no mention of the departure of a million slaves.

Here, we should remember that issues like scientific accuracy or historic authenticity were not high priorities for the people who told these stories. No, the priority for them was to emphasise whatever original event inspired such tales. According to scholars like George E. Mendenhah (1916-2016), the inspiration for the Exodus story might have been a peasants' revolt against the suzerainty of Egypt and its allies in Canaan (a suzerainty refers to a sovereign or state that has some control over another state that is internally autonomous). Executing a successful peasants' revolt was a rare occurrence indeed, one Armstrong described as "an extraordinary experience of the empowerment of the oppressed against the powerful and the mighty".

In Dueteronomy 26: 5-8 we find what may be another early interpretation of the Exodus story, one prior to the narrative recorded by J and E. In this particular story, priests of Yahweh issue a command that the first fruits of harvest be presented to them. The Israelites carrying out this order make the following affirmation:

"The Egyptians ill-treated 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 signs and wonders. He brought us [to Canaan] and gave us this land...Here then I bring you the first-fruits of the produce of the soil that you, Yahweh, have given me".

The Lost Origins of Yahweh

Notice here how this version of the story describes Yahweh as 'the god of our fathers', a claim that would appear to contradict the story of Moses' encounter with God. In that encounter, remember, Moses' god was insistent that he, Yahweh, was the same god as El Shaddai, the name by which Abraham had known his god. God really presses on this point, repeating it many times, and to some scholars what this insistence preserves is early debates concerning the identity of Moses' god.

Although the story retold in Deuteronomy describes Yahweh as 'the god of our fathers', there's reason to believe this may in fact have been a quite different deity from the Canaan high god that had been worshiped by the Patriarchs. Before he became the god of Israel, Yahweh may have been the god of other people. Scholars like Salo Wittmeyer Baron (1895-1989) have proposed that Yahweh was originally worshipped in Midian in what is now Jordan, where he was conceived of as a god of volcanos. The area of Midian also features in Moses' own story. It's where he took refuge having been forced to flee Egypt for killing an Egyptian who was brutalising an Hebrew slave. It's also where he had the encounter with the Burning Bush.

There is, therefore, some connection between the god of the Israelites and the 'Midianite theory' that claims Yahweh was originally the god of the people of Midian. But the Midianite theory is usually discredited today, and it's highly doubtful that we'll ever find definitive answers to questions like "was Yahweh really a completely new deity?", or "where might the inspiration for a god like Yahweh have come from?'. The reason why we will never know the

answer to such questions is because such details were of no concern to the writers who developed these tales. Different gods were often combined in Pagan antiquity, or the gods of one people accepted as identical with the deity another people worshipped. Such copying and recombination, coupled with the inevitably patchy archeological and historical record, makes it virtually impossible to reconstruct the evolution of a concept like 'Yahweh'.

The story of Exodus is suggestive of some sort of amalgamation of the Israelite god with the gods of antiquity. Consider, for instance, that most dramatic of incidents, the parting of the Red Sea. For people of the ancient Middle East, such an event would have been quite familiar from tales of their own gods. As we shall see, in Egyptian, Babylonian and Mesopotamian myths, creation had involved gods "separating waters".

There is, however, a notable difference between these events and the action attributed to Moses' god. The gods of Pagan antiquity had not separated the waters of an actual, physical sea. The 'waters' in these origin myths is instead some poetical reference to a formless chaos said to have existed in the time before there were any gods to impose order and regularity. But Yahweh's separation of waters is not attributed to some far distant age of mythological beginnings, but instead centred around a physical sea existing in the profane world of historical time. Here, we should recall how J's origin myth was much more concerned with historical time. The prehistorical age of myth is dealt with in a perfunctory manner, and by far the greater attention is placed on the Canaanites and their history. Not necessarily what we would think of as 'history', as in an authentic account of actual past events, but rather a combination of events that might have happened and mythological exaggerations, inserted to press home whatever message such stories were originally intended to have.

For such people, generating stories that had the best chance of imparting the right message (whatever that might have been) was given top priority, and if that meant deviating from historical authenticity and scientific accuracy, so be it. If other people had told stories of gods and an age of wonders that could serve to make a story more impactful in ways that mattered, why not weave such details into the stories that needed telling?

Because the writers that developed early Biblical texts over the course of centuries were not concerned with historical authenticity as we would define such a term, and often merged the gods of antiquity, the task of establishing the provenance of Yahweh is nigh on impossible. Where this god originally came from is something we don't know and something that the writers of tales we have encountered did not particularly care to know. The only thing we do know for sure is that Yahweh was made the definitive god of Israel by the events told in the Exodus story, and that the Israelites fully accepted Moses' claims, namely, that the god he worshipped was the same god as El, the god of the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The Separateness of Yahweh

Having said that, the way God is presented in the story of Moses' encounter with this deity shows that the 'god of our fathers' had evolved into a different kind of deity from that of El, the god of Abraham. Consider, for example, the very first encounter Moses had with his deity, when God appeared in the form of a bush that burned without being consumed:

“ ‘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, the God of Jacob’. At that Moses covered his face, afraid to look at God”.

This encounter with God is very different to the one told about Abraham’s encounter with his god by the site of the holy tree of Mamon. In the case of that encounter, god had come in the guise of a stranger, and the entire exchange had been no more remarkable than if it had been an ordinary man who had shared a meal in Abraham’s tent. This unremarkable encounter with gods was a fairly common feature of ancient Pagan myth. We find such an encounter in Homer’s Iliad, for example, where we’re told that Priam encountered a young man who, it turns out, was actually the god Hermes. “When the Greeks looked back to the golden age of their heroes”, Armstrong pointed out, “they felt that they had been closely in touch with the gods, who were, after all, of the same nature as human beings”.

But, in the story of Moses’ encounter, his god insists on keeping a distance between himself and Moses, and being in his presence invokes a fearful reaction. It seems, then, that Yahweh was being conceived of as a deity that represented a gulf between the divine and the profane worlds, rather than gods like Hermes or El, who, being of the same basic nature, were more approachable.

By way of introduction, God describes himself as “the god of Abraham”. But, in this first encounter, he does not divulge his name. When asked what name he goes by, god responds with a comment that is rather cryptic, saying “Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh” (“I am who I am”).

The Power of Names

In much later traditions, those existing literally millennia after this encounter supposedly took place, this assertion would be interpreted in metaphysical terms. What God is saying, according to this interpretation, is that he is a self-subsistent being. In other words, whereas we mortals depend upon the preexistence of other human beings, and biological forms in general, and elements like carbon, nitrogen and oxygen, and stars that forged those elements via nuclear synthesis (generating life-giving heat and light in the process) and a universe in which all of these necessary preconditions took place, God needs none of this. He is the ‘prime mover’ that existed before all creation was brought into being by his Word.

It’s doubtful, though, that the earliest Hebrew writers intended any such sophisticated metaphysical interpretation. Phrases like “I am who I am” and “they went where they went” were used in Hebrew writing to signify that the story teller did not know where they went, much as we might say “god knows where that thing I am looking for has gone”. When God replied “Ehyeh Asher Ehyeh”, those early Hebrews would have understood this to mean God was being deliberately vague. It’s basically the same thing as God telling Moses, “mind your own business!”. It was a reply that set certain limits. God’s nature was not to be discussed and there would be no attempt to manipulate him. You see, in the ancient Pagan world it was believed that if you knew somebody’s name, that gave you a certain power over that individual. So, when Moses’ god effectively replied “never you mind who I am!”, he was saying that, other than promising to participate in the history of his people, he made no guarantees and would be whatever he chose to be. He was, as Armstrong put it, “the unconditioned one”.

A Background of Polytheism

The gulf between humans and this god who promised to participate in the history of his worshippers was emphasised in other stories centred on Moses. The tale of his encounter with Yahweh on Mt Sinai is a good example. Having been led out of bondage and journeyed to the mountainous peninsula in Northeast Egypt, Moses told his followers not only to purify their clothes, but that they were not to so much as touch the foot of Mt Sinai, under pain of death. Only Moses had the privilege of ascending to the summit, where he would receive God's law. Once again, then, this was no social encounter like Abraham lunching with El, but an awe-inspiring and fearful event:

"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".

It's noteworthy that Moses encountered this terrifying spectacle and then received the laws of God. This was quite different to how, in the Pagan vision, nature's laws and harmony were experienced. In that case, principles of order were felt in the very nature of things. But now, in his fearful encounter with his god, the law became something handed down from on high. As Armstrong explained, "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".

We can see from these stories, then, how the way god was conceived was becoming distinct from earlier, Pagan conceptions. But, the final text of Exodus, which was edited in the 5th century BCE, also shows that certain Pagan assumptions remained in place. Most especially, as we have noted previously, the Commandments passed down from God to Man priorities demands not to worship other gods. In fact, one can go through the whole of the Pentateuch (a compilation of texts from the 9th-5th centuries BCE that now make up the first five books of the Old Testament) and would have enormous difficulty finding any statement that could be called 'Monotheistic'.

Really, the only conclusion we can draw from this is that, at the time when the events of Exodus supposedly took place (Moses' encounter on Mt Sinai was supposed to have happened around 1200 BCE) the Israelites were very much polytheists. That is the only way to make sense of both the Commandments, and the covenant made between Yahweh and his chosen people.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Covenant

The events in Exodus inform us that the Israelites found it very difficult to stick to their promise to worship a single god. They were not alone in finding this an almost impossible promise to keep. About a thousand years prior to the supposed date of Exodus, the Egyptian Pharaoh, Akhenaton (1380-1336 BCE), had tried worshipping only the Sun god, ignoring Egypt's other traditional deities. His policies did not last long, for they were immediately reversed when his successor took over.

It's not surprising that people who were steeped in ancient Pagan belief had great difficulty in rejecting other gods. For one thing, that meant turning your back on a potential source of the Numinous. Also, nobody had yet conceived of a god as an omnipotent being, but instead personified various aspects of nature as different deities. Therefore, while you might well have followed a god of war like Mars or Yahweh in times of conflict or persecution, at other times your attention would have turned to other gods, such as worshipping at the altar of the goddess of Fertility in order to ensure this year's harvest would be plentiful.

This is pretty much what the Israelites are said to have done when they settled in the promised land of Canaan. Even though they had formed a covenant with Yahweh and promised to worship him alone, they turned to the cult of Baal, a god who had long been held to have the power to make the crops grow. Their tendency to revert to more traditional Canaanite worship is also depicted in the story of Mt Sinai. While Moses left his people to receive the commandments, they, in his absence, made a golden bull and set about performing the ancient rites before it. For Canaanites, the bull was the traditional effigy of El.

This part of the story is one that many people find decidedly odd. Yahweh had already demonstrated his willingness to exert terrifying powers. He had struck Egypt with ten plagues, parted the Red Sea and drowned Pharaoh's army, and made Mt Sinai tremble and become shrouded in smoke and flame. And yet, right at the base of his holy mountain, his people engaged in the very act most likely to incur his wrath. They turned to the cults of other gods.

For atheist skeptics like Dawkins, this story is one of many that shows Biblical tales to be confusing, contradictory, and weird. For other scholars, what the final editors of the Pentateuch were trying to convey in juxtaposing these awesome events with the incident of the golden bull, was a pretty bitter division among the Israelites and prophets like Moses. For, while they still turned to the ancient Pagan religions with their holistic vision of unity between the Profane and the Holy, the prophets like Moses were preaching the religion of Yahweh, a god more separated from the profane world than most people were used to.

Still, though they may have found it a very hard promise to keep, the people of Israel did agree to the covenant, and that is an indication that they were taking tentative steps from polytheism to monotheism. Covenants were used quite a lot in the politics of the Middle East. It was a formal treaty that bound two parties together. Like most formal arrangements, the covenant followed a set form. Firstly, the text introduced the king, the most powerful partner. Following that was a history that traced the relations of the two parties up to the present day. With that history laid out, attention then turned to legal matters like terms and conditions and penalties.

Above all the covenant demanded absolute loyalty. That was essential to the whole idea of such a treaty. So, when Middle Eastern people heard that their forefathers had formed a covenant with God, they would have known right away that this entailed complete and utter loyalty to Yahweh. The existence of other gods was not yet denied, as can be seen in the words of this covenant.

The covenant was agreed to when the Israelites made it to Canaan and joined up with kin who already lived there. One side of the two parties, therefore, was the descendants of Abraham. Yahweh was the other party, and in the ceremony that established this covenant, he was represented by Moses' successor, Joshua.

As ever, the standard form of such treatise was held to. The most powerful partner was introduced, which in this case was Yahweh. There then followed a recap of the history between him and the other party. With all that taken care of, it was time to specify the terms of agreement. Here is what Joshua demanded of the people of Israel, on Yahweh's behalf:

"Now therefore fear the LORD and serve him in sincerity and truth: and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the Flood, and in Egypt, and serve ye the LORD. And if it seem evil to serve the LORD, choose you this day whom ye will serve: whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the Flood, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land ye dwell: but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD".

As you can see, once again these terms do not deny the existence of other gods, as any monotheist prophet would be expected to do. Rather, the covenant lays out a clear choice, which is to either follow Yahweh, or to settle for the traditional gods of Canaan. The people voiced their reasons for worshipping Yahweh and forsaking the older gods:

"The LORD our god, he it is that brought us up and our fathers out of of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, and which did those great things in our sight, and preserved us in all the way wherein we went and among all the people through whom we passed".

Since Yahweh had proven himself to be such an effective deity, clearly demonstrating his ability to be not just a terrible god, but a god of revolutions, willing to intervene on the behalf of an oppressed people, they decided to agree to the covenant. Joshua made it clear what breaking the covenant by worshipping other gods would mean:

"If ye forsake the LORD and serve strange gods, then he will turn and do you hurt and consume you".

Given the sheer brutality attributed to Yahweh, this must have seemed like a very stark warning indeed. Nevertheless, the Bible tells us that the terms of the Covenant were not always practiced. Really, it was only adhered to when the people felt they needed the protection of a god skilled in the martial arts. But the dark clouds of war did not always hang over the descendants of Abraham, and in more peaceful times they reverted to their old ways, worshipping gods like Baal.

Elijah Versus the Prophets of Baal

Even when the people did worship Yahweh, such devotion usually manifested itself in ways that were very reminiscent of the old pagan traditions. King Solomon's temple, which was built in Jerusalem, a city captured from the Jebusites by his father, David, is a good example. Although it was meant for Yahweh, in terms of appearance it was similar to the temples of the Canaanite gods. There was a huge bronze basin inside the temple, which represented the primeval sea of Canaanite myth, and also two great free-standing pillars. They represented the mother goddess Asherath, a deity who inspired a fertility cult.

As well as following Pagan traditions in building the Temple of Solomon, King Solomon himself continued to have friendly dealings with his Canaanite neighbours. Many of his wives were Pagan, and they continued to worship their own gods.

So the cult of Yahweh, so very different in its historical bias, faced many obstacles in replacing the more holistic deities of Pagan belief. In fact, up until around 896 BCE, there was an almost ever-present danger of the cult of Yahweh becoming totally submerged under popular Paganism. What was significant about that year was that this was when King Ahab ruled and he, you'll recall, had a wife- Jezebel- who was the daughter of the King of Tyre and Sidon. She was a firm believer in Paganism. So much so, in fact, that she set about converting the country to the religion of Baal and Asherath.

In doing so, she proved herself to be rather exceptional so far as Paganism is concerned. Being a polytheistic belief system, Paganism is usually content to include more deities along with those already included in the pantheon of the gods. By and large, people were usually free to worship their kingdom's own gods, along with those newly introduced deities their conquerors brought along. In striving to convert the Northern kingdom of Israel to the religion of Baal and Asherath, Jezebel proved herself to be an exception to this rule.

In order to convert the people, she brought over priests of Baal. These pagan holy men found it quite easy to establish a following. This was because the northerners they were trying to convert had been conquered by king David and did not have much interest in Yahwenism. Jezebel's husband, King Ahab, was a follower of Yahweh, but nevertheless he made no attempt to stop his wife's plans of conversion.

But then a couple of things happened. Firstly, the land was struck with a severe drought. Secondly, a prophet began wandering the land, spreading his message, and what a figure he must have cut. Dressed in a hairy mantle and leather loincloth, this prophet really lived up to his name, which was Eli-Jah, meaning 'Yahweh is my god!'. He was angrily opposed to any worship of a god other than Yahweh, and certainly didn't like the way the people of Israel were breaking the terms of the covenant.

So, whereas Jezebel wanted to convert people to the religion of Baal, Elijah was determined to convert them to the cult of Yahweh. According to the Biblical story, his method of conversion involved a contest. This contest took place on Mount Carmel, part of a mountain range that overlooks the Mediterranean Sea. There, in the presence of King Ahab and 450 prophets of Baal, Elijah angrily told the people that the time of indecision was over. They were to choose once and for all which deity they would follow: Baal or Yahweh.

With that choice laid out, Elijah asked for two bulls. These animals were placed on two altars. The prophets of Baal were to call upon their god to send fire down from heaven and sacrifice the bull, while Elijah would call upon Yahweh to do likewise. The prophets of Baal spent the entire morning calling upon their god to show his strength to his followers, but their ritual dances and other forms of communing with their deity were met with no answer.

Having witnessed the prophets' utter failure, the people turned their attention to the other altar, where Elijah was waiting. As soon as this prophet of Yahweh called upon his god, fire fell from heaven, consuming both bull and altar. Not surprisingly, this dramatic demonstration had the desired effect. The people fell upon their faces, proclaiming, "Yahweh is god!".

Having turned the people into worshippers of Yahweh, Elijah then ordered them to "seize the prophets of Baal!". Having captured them and taken them to a nearby valley, Elijah and his followers showed no mercy to those prophets of a rival god. All 450 of them were massacred.

Another Step Towards Monotheism

As ever with tales from this period, the emphasis was not placed on historical accuracy, but rather on delivering the right message. And the message that the story of Elijah must have conveyed was that the days of tolerating other faiths was coming to an end. As the story of Elijah clearly demonstrated, Yahwehnism not only denied other faiths but violently suppressed them.

But, as far as Elijah and his followers were concerned, there was still the important limitation that their deity was a god of war, and there are times when people turn to the specialties of other gods. At this time, recall, the area was in the grip of a terrible drought, so there was every chance that the people might turn back to Baal, a male fertility god thought to be capable of creating rainstorms.

So, after the massacre, Elijah and a servant climbed to the summit of Mount Carmel. While Elijah devoted himself to prayer, calling upon his god to fully usurp Baal, his servant scanned the horizon, looking for the tell-tale sign that his master's prayers were about to be answered. Eventually, Elijah's servant reported seeing a cloud rising up from the sea. It was not a big cloud. The servant reckoned it to be about the size of a man's fist from his vantage point. But it was enough to convince Elijah to send his servant and inform King Ahab to get home quickly before the rains prevented his journey. Immediately after giving this instruction, the skies above became filled with storm clouds, and prodigious amounts of rain fell upon the parched lands. Elijah, ecstatic, came down from the mountain and ran alongside Ahab's chariot, delivering amazing news. Yahweh had sent rain, and in doing so he had demonstrated that he was not only an effective warrior god, but an effective fertility god, too. He had taken over Baal's function as a storm god.

This was not the last demonstration of Yahweh's powers that Elijah is said to have witnessed. Some time after the rains first fell, he is said to have fled the Sinai peninsula, apparently fearing recrimination following his massacre of the prophets. Having journeyed to Sinai, he took refuge on the very mountain where Moses had once experienced a 'theophany' or a visible manifestation of a god. In Moses' case, that manifestation had come

in the form of a burning bush. Elijah's theophany, however, was something dramatically different.

"Behold, the LORD passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains and broke in pieces the rocks before the LORD: but the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake: but the LORD was not in the earthquake: and after the earthquake a fire: but the LORD 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 cloth".

How interesting that it should have been a tiny breeze that provoked this reaction, rather than the more dramatic spectacles of storms, earthquakes and fires. What did it signify? It was a demonstration of a different kind of spirituality. The point of the story was to show that Yahweh was unlike the Pagan deities of antiquity. For, whereas those gods were the personification of natural forces like spring or rainstorms, Yahweh could command those forces but, at the same time, was not in them but in a realm apart from the forces of nature. "He is", as Armstrong put it, "experienced in the scarcely perceptible timbre of a tiny breeze in the paradox of a voiced silence".

As far as Jewish scripture is concerned, the story of Elijah contains the last mystical account of the past. The time when the events told in this story supposedly happened place these events roughly around the time when change was happening throughout those parts of the world that Hellenic geographers labelled the Oikumene. The old, Bronze-age, agrarian civilisations like Egypt and Mesopotamia would vanish, their mythological worldviews and deeply hierarchal societies no longer adequate to cope with the changing reality. Instead, new religious systems would arise, ones better suited to the socioeconomic circumstances of this new era.

So Where Are We?

I believe the application of literary criticism, combined with archeological discoveries and anthropological studies, shows that we can identify some mythstakes in religious thought. While the concept of God is too poetical, vague and flexible to be subject to falsification, and therefore does not qualify as a mythstake, other beliefs surrounding the concept of God, from both believers and nonbelievers, may well qualify.

As we have seen, some atheists have tried to debunk the idea that the god hypothesis explains our origins or why we should be good, apparently convinced that once one accepts no answers to these questions exist in Religion, Religion will be rejected as it is known to be useless. But plenty of people are not attracted to Religion because they seek such answers; instead they feel there has to be something that transcends ordinary life and that Science is but one perspective on reality, limited to measuring the material world but not at all equipped to understand the Numinous.

As for the Mythstake that believers are guilty of, those who believe "that which transcends ordinary life" refers to God, and the Biblical God has always been monotheist in the sense it is meant today, are turning a blind eye to an abundance of evidence that shows the Hebrew God of the Old Testament was a tribal god of armies, 'existing' among many rival gods, who only later evolved into the one and only God.

We have also seen how the creation myths discussed so far don't quite correspond to what we now think of 'creation myths'. We think of such things as stories of how the universe came into being, but the myths discussed in this book are, for the most part, legends of how the history of a people got started.

It should be obvious, though, that the writers of the Bible did eventually get around to creating myths about how the world was created. After all, the Old Testament now begins with such a myth, and it's possibly the most famous such story in human history. In fact, the story of God's creation of the world in Genesis and another creation story that comes immediately after, to do with Man's birth and corruption in the Garden of Eden, are so famous and embedded in our psyche, we tend to recreate this myth whenever we speculate on what life for prehistoric humans may have been like. In so doing, we may (as evidence strongly suggests) not be recovering the actual past of our ancestors, but inventing more Mythstakes.

This is what Book Eight will explore.

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