Chapter 1
The Origins of the Gods

In about 1800 BC a man called Abram (or Abraham, as he was later to be named) set out from his hometown of Ur, in Chaldea, bound for Canaan. He was accompanied by his father Terah, his childless wife Sarai (or Sarah, as she was later to be named) and his nephew Lot. The story is told in the Old Testament book of Genesis. The family reached Harran, where Abraham decided to settle and where Terah later died at the ripe old age of 205. Then, without any apparent warning, a God appeared to Abraham and promised to make him the father of a great nation. The God told him to complete his journey to Canaan; and although he was now 75 years of age, Abraham obeyed and set off with Sarah, Lot and all their possessions. At Schechem, a city on an important trade route north of Jerusalem, the God promised Abraham that he would give the whole of the country to his descendants. Abraham built an altar there before moving on to settle in the land between Bethel and Ai.

Who was this God who commanded Abraham's obedience? Judaism has accepted him as the God who eventually united the various ethnic groups that made up the people of Israel, and Christianity has proclaimed him as the God who became incarnate in Jesus Christ. The early biblical stories about him are, however, far from consistent, for they originated in different places and were written many centuries after the events to which they bear witness. The first five books of the Old Testament (the Pentateuch) did not exist in their present form before about 900 BC and they were not brought together until several centuries after that. Generations of oral tradition must have separated the life of Abraham from the only record of it that now exists – and stories can change quite dramatically as they are told and retold across the ages. It is by no means certain that Abraham even existed.

A further difficulty in identifying the God who appeared to Abraham is the variety of names that he bears in the early books of the Old Testament, a legacy in part of the different sources from which the Pentateuch was compiled. Following the death of King Solomon in 922 BC the single kingdom of Israel split into two separate kingdoms, each adopting a different name for Abraham's God. Documents from the

southern kingdom of Judah favoured the name of YHWH, while those from the northern kingdom of Israel preferred the name Elohim. They had to be treated with care, for the naming of gods in the ancient world was a risky thing to do, but it would have proved impossible to write the religious history of a nation without referring to the central character in the drama. Although the proper name of Abraham's God could never be spoken, it was written in a number of different ways. The most common form in the Old Testament, occurring more than six thousand times, is YHWH, the name that was typically used in the southern kingdom of Judah. It is usually pronounced in Western speech as either Yahweh (the form used in this book) or Yehovah, and it is conventionally written in English translations of the Bible as 'the LORD'.

The slightly later writers in the northern kingdom of Israel favoured the name of Elohim, a plural or composite form of El. Among the ancient mythologies of the Middle East, El was the high god of Canaan and the consort of the goddess Ashera. Other gods in the Canaanite pantheon included Mot, the god of sterility and death, and El's son Baal, the god of fertility and new life whose worship went back at least to the time of the ancient Semites living in Bronze Age Canaan. Baal and his consort Astarte, the goddess of sexual love, were prominent deities in the eastern Mediterranean, ensuring the continuation each year of the great cycle of germination and fruitfulness. The fertility rituals performed by the priests of Baal and Astarte included temple prostitution and other symbolic enactments of conception and birth. Elsewhere in Canaan, first-born children were sacrificed to the Ammonite god Milcom, the young victims being slowly burned to death in the outstretched arms of the idol. King Solomon, the exemplar of Jewish wisdom, was a worshipper of both Astarte and Milcom, even erecting a shrine to Milcom on the Mount of Olives to please his foreign wives. The story, narrated in the first book of Kings, was taken up by John Milton in *Paradise Lost* where he depicted Milcom as 'the horrid King besmear'd with blood of human sacrifice and parents tears'.

It was this polytheistic culture, presided over by the high god El, that Abraham would have encountered when he travelled to Canaan in about 1800 BC. The Genesis stories about him and his descendants give various names to the God who came suddenly into their lives. The God first introduced himself to Abraham as Yahweh (the LORD); but when Abraham was blessed by the priestly King of Salem, Melchizedeck, the blessing was in the name of El Elyon (usually translated into English as

God Most High). When the God appeared to Abraham in his hundredth year he introduced himself as El Shaddai (God Almighty). Other names that appear in the Genesis narratives include El Roi (the God who sees), El Olam (the everlasting God) and El Bethel (the God of Bethel).

It is natural to wonder about the relationship between these appellations. Were there several gods, each with its own name, or was there just one God introducing himself under different titles? Moreover, was there any connection, other than the obvious linguistic one, between the God who appears in the Genesis stories as El and the ancient Canaanite god of the same name? The confusions multiply when the narrative moves on a few hundred years to the time of Moses, for although Yahweh had by now been worshipped by the Hebrew people for generations, Moses did not recognise him when he appeared in the burning bush on Mount Horeb. Speaking through the flames, Yahweh identified himself as 'the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob'; yet in spite of coming face to face with his tribal deity, Moses had to ask what name he should use when he returned to Egypt and told the people about the encounter. Later, Yahweh explained the reason for the confusion: in his earlier appearances to the patriarchs he had always called himself El Shaddai, not Yahweh. Moses' mistake was, perhaps, understandable after all.

Whether there were one, two or several gods at this very early stage in Jewish history is a question that does not lend itself to normal historical enquiry. By the time the early books of the Bible came together in their present edited form in about the third century BC, Judaism had been a monotheistic faith for several centuries, and it is all too easy to assume that the early patriarchs had been committed to a single God. Yet there is no necessary reason why Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, moving among the polytheistic communities of the Middle East, were ever devoted to a single God. When Jacob's wife Rachel moved out of her father's home in Mesopotamia, for example, she took with her the portable gods that had been in the family for a long time. Although, therefore, the Hebrew tribes had been familiar with Yahweh from a very early time, other gods were not only well known to them but also (according to the record in the Old Testament) were worshipped by them. As well as Yahweh, the name of the Canaanite high god El still survives in such familiar Old Testament names as Bethel, Penuel, Ishmael and of course Israel.

Although the origins of the deity who entered the lives of Abraham and Sarah must remain forever obscure, we do know something of the ways in which people first became conscious of the spirit world around

them and of the gods who populated it. For this, we have to thank the work of cultural anthropologists, especially in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sir James Frazer's (1854-1941) compendious text *The Golden Bough*, published in stages between 1890 and 1915, made a particularly significant contribution to our understanding of the origins of religious belief. His findings caused a stir among late Victorian and Edwardian clerics who saw them as a calculated challenge to the religious certainties they were preaching, and *The Golden Bough* was widely condemned as a book that was neither safe nor proper for Christians to read. Frazer's work, however, proved too popular to be dismissed out of hand; and once he had drawn aside the veil concealing the primitive origins of many religious practices, Christians could never again be wholly innocent about the complex antecedents of their familiar beliefs and rituals.

In the early stages of human religious awareness, gods took many forms: stones, trees, animals, figurines, totem poles, statuettes, seas and rivers, sun and moon, and so on. Since they were typically the gods of nomadic people, they had to be either portable or universally available. The divine objects were believed to be animated by spirits that could transmit their life-force to those who worshipped them, protecting them from disasters and endowing them with valuable advantages in the remorseless struggle for life. By the early Mesolithic period in Europe (from roughly 12,000 BC), nomadic lifestyles were giving way to more settled farming communities, and gods could become larger and more static beings, sometimes with their own dwelling places. Temples were appearing in Mesopotamia (modern day Iraq) by about 5000 BC as gods became embedded in the history and culture of local settlements, commanding the allegiance of successive generations of worshippers. Some of the earliest deities were feminine, their pendulous breasts and prominent genitalia betraying the supreme importance of fertility in the life of agricultural communities. As towns and cities expanded and urban cultures developed, female deities gradually gave way to male. By about 2000 BC elaborate rituals, mainly involving the worship of male gods, were already well established in India, China, Mexico and parts of North America.

As the gods became increasingly important in their local communities, elaborate cults grew up around them involving priests, rituals, and holy objects. The ruling elite in a community typically appointed themselves as the chosen servants or priests of the local god, attending to his needs, managing his affairs and interpreting his wishes. The lower strata of society, the labourers and agricultural workers, provided the sacrifices needed to appease and satisfy him. The

biblical story of the Babylonian god Bel is a vivid account of a local middle-eastern cult in about the second century BC. Superintended by temple priests who ensured that he received the food he needed, Bel 'miraculously' got through twelve bushels of flour, forty sheep and fifty gallons of wine a day – though in reality, of course, these vast provisions were being siphoned off by the priests for themselves and their families. As well as their physical presence in their temples on earth, gods sometimes led other, transcendental lives in the cosmic sphere above. They had their abodes among the pantheons of heaven as well as their dwelling places on earth. Seated on their thrones above the celestial firmament, they were spiritual sovereigns exercising their power remotely over their temporal subjects on earth: lords of lords and kings of kings.

At some point in the evolution of religious beliefs, people began to think of gods as inhabiting, or even becoming, human beings. Throughout the history of religious belief, outstanding men (and very occasionally women) have been thought to be possessed by a deity, or at least to have such a high degree of supernatural power as to be a virtual god. With the status of divinity came also the sacrificial homage of the people. In many cases these human gods had regal as well as divine authority, turning their kingdoms into theocracies. There are numerous examples throughout recorded history. Egyptian pharaohs, Chinese emperors, Mesopotamian and Babylonian kings, American Indian tribal leaders, Inca emperors, Nepalese kings and Japanese emperors were all worshipped in their lifetimes as human gods, the last two until well into the twentieth century. European monarchs were rarely deified (though some were canonised), but many claimed a God-given right to the exercise of absolute power. To be touched by a king was to be favoured as if by a direct blessing from heaven. The 'king's touch', as it came to be known, could also mediate the healing power of God. As late as the seventeenth century, scrofula (tuberculosis of the lymph nodes) was thought in England to be curable through contact with the monarch. Charles I (1600-1649) 'cured' a hundred patients at a time in his chapel at Holyrood Palace in Edinburgh, and Charles II (1630-1685) is said to have touched around a hundred thousand scrofulous subjects in the course of his reign. The king's touch, however, could not survive the progress of science: William III (1650-1702) contemptuously refused to engage in such magical antics, declaring on the only recorded occasion on which he touched a subject: 'God give you better health and more sense'.

The religions of ancient Greece and Rome, which were flourishing in the pluralistic hothouse of the Mediterranean world at the time of Jesus, provide some of the clearest examples of the fusion between the human and the divine. Gods still embodied the pure essence of divinity, of course, but human beings could be raised to divine status through the gifts they possessed or the powers they displayed. An inscription on the acropolis on Mount Mycale in modern-day Turkey describes the first of the Roman emperors, Caesar Augustus (63 BC – AD 14), not only as Emperor but also as the Son of God. He was worshipped in his own lifetime as Lord, Redeemer, and Saviour of the World – all titles that were later used by Christians to emphasise their emerging belief in the divinity of Jesus Christ. Plainly, some careful analysis is needed to distinguish between the divinity of Augustus and that of Christ.

A quantum leap in the evolution of religious belief took place in the Hebrew faith when the gods became God. Among the descendants of Abraham the conviction gradually emerged, probably over a long period of time, that there was, in fact, only one true God. When and how the transition occurred cannot be mapped in any great detail, but there are clues. When Yahweh gave Moses the tablets of commandment on Mount Sinai in about 1250 BC, he was making no claims to uniqueness. In his first commandment to Moses he acknowledged that he was not the *only* God, merely the one who demanded the undivided loyalty of his people: 'You shall have no other gods before me.' Yahweh was not alone among the deities on offer in those polytheistic times: in theory, and often in practice too, the people had a choice. When some four hundred years later Elijah challenged the prophets of Baal to call down fire on a sacrificial bullock, the prophet's argument was not that Baal did not exist, merely that he was a less potent god than Yahweh. By the time the long-suffering Job appeared on the scene in about 700 BC, however, the Jewish scriptures were beginning to depict their God as the sole surviving resident in the formerly populous pantheon of the Canaanite gods. He was also someone with whom an interactive relationship was possible.

It was a step change. Gods (including Yahweh, if the Pentateuch is anything to go by) had often been seen as remote and fearsome beings who appeared wreathed in smoke on the tops of mountains and who spoke through thunder and lightning. Their divine anger at the wickedness of their people could only be appeased by sacrifice and worship. People had good reason to tremble and bow before their gods, for if their fate depended upon the will of a powerful deity, it was prudent to respect

his holiness and acknowledge his majesty. Yet here was Job audaciously complaining to the God of Israel, arguing with him, and even calling him to account for his actions. The dramatic story of Job's dialogue with Yahweh, which has few parallels in the Hebrew Scriptures, is a striking example of human autonomy flexing its muscles in protest against the actions of a seemingly capricious God. Job had the self-confidence to rail not only against the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune that came his way but also against the deity who was hurling them. His daring and risky interrogation of Yahweh, who had shown himself more than capable of obliterating those who crossed his path, is a dramatic milestone in mankind's long and continuing search for the meaning of life. Why was God condemning him to an existence of unbridled misery? What had he done to deserve such divine disfavour? God's hand, Job complained, was heavy upon him in his trouble; and he refused to be fobbed off by those who thought he was playing with fire in calling God to account. Job demanded an explanation – and it had better be a good one. It was, by any standards, a breath-taking display of bold self-righteousness.

The introduction of the moral language of sin and expiation allowed another momentous step to be taken in the development of religious consciousness when the 'scapegoat' emerged as a practical way of dealing with the mountain of human sinfulness and guilt. The problem was, in essence, quite straightforward. Gods laid down the rules of human behaviour; people sinned by breaking them; and if the resultant anger of the gods was to be appeased, ways had to be found of atoning for sin and repairing the fractured relationship. The scapegoat became a highly effective mechanism for doing so. In *The Golden Bough*, James Frazer defined a scapegoat as an animal or a person onto whom the sinful burdens of individuals and communities were symbolically laid. By then disposing of the animal, often in a ritual sacrifice overseen by priests, the sins would die with the scapegoat and the favour of the gods would be restored. A new start could be made, unencumbered by the weight of the personal and corporate guilt of the people and the wrath of the gods.

The Jewish faith, from which the later Christian ideas of sin and atonement developed, attached a great deal of importance to the ritual sacrifice of scapegoats in the temple in Jerusalem. Various animals, cloven and otherwise, were symbolically saddled with the sins of the people and then slaughtered in a particular way before being burnt at the altar by a priest. Sins would be blotted out in the sight of Yahweh as

the scapegoat shrivelled and burnt. Detailed rules were set out about the form and conduct of these sacrificial ceremonies, each part of which had to be followed to the letter if Yahweh was to be satisfied. Different kinds of sacrifices were offered in atonement for different kinds of sins, but most of the rituals had a common template. Typically, the scapegoat had to be a young and flawless animal, its blood had to be poured out at the base of the altar, and its fat had to be removed and burnt separately as a soothing balm for Yahweh's pleasure.

At various times in Jewish history the prophets spoke out against the whole cultic system of scapegoat and sacrifice, demanding instead a more humane and contrite response to God's calls for repentance. Micah, writing in about 700 BC, declared that sacrifices were anathema to Yahweh: it was far more important that people should act justly and walk humbly with him. Amos, too, was saying much the same thing at about the same time. For a long time, however, the sacrificial offering of animal scapegoats was central to the Jewish understanding of Yahweh and his relationship with the people. There are also examples in the Old Testament of the cultic use of a living scapegoat. According to the book of Leviticus, Yahweh commanded Aaron, the first high priest of the cult, to take a live goat, place his hands upon its head and confess all the sins of the Hebrews. Aaron was then to send the animal into the wilderness where it would carry the iniquities of the people into the oblivion of the desert, there to be lost forever.

People as well as animals could sometimes be coerced into duty as scapegoats for the misdemeanours of their fellows. In *The Golden Bough*, James Frazer reported several interesting examples from around the world of human scapegoats cancelling out the sins of others by undergoing some form of substitutionary punishment in their stead. In parts of India, the sins of a rajah would be ritually transferred to a convicted criminal who earned his pardon by vicariously suffering in place of the ruler. In other places a local Brahman was paid to pick up the rajah's sins and then to die on his behalf. In some countries of Africa, the services of sickly men and women were purchased each year by public subscription. Those who had committed a serious offence such as theft or adultery were expected to atone for their misdeeds by paying for the cost of these human scapegoats, and a man from a neighbouring town was hired to kill them. In all of these examples the slate of moral accountability was wiped clean by the vicarious suffering of the scapegoat: the gods were appeased and life was able to begin afresh, free from the fear of divine retribution.

Even a human god could, on occasion, become a scapegoat. Frazer thought that where this happened, two separate traditions were brought

together in a single act of deicide. One was the use of human scapegoats; the other was the killing of living gods before they had time to be ravaged by the decrepitude of old age. If human gods were to be killed in any case before they became too infirm to be of any further use, they might as well be killed as scapegoats. A divine scapegoat is likely to be a far more effective atonement for sin than a merely human one. It would then make sense to heap the sins of a community onto the human god and kill him in a sacrificial manner to ensure that the evil deeds would die with him. The atoning power of a divine sacrifice has been a consistent leitmotif in the human imagination. The Christian story of the death of Jesus, in which a divine man was killed to atone for the sins of all mankind, is not unique among the stories that have come down from the ancient world.

So Yahweh, the LORD, the God whom Christians later came to believe was incarnate in Jesus Christ, appeared on the scene some four thousand years ago, revealing himself to Abraham through a series of extravagant promises. As Abraham and his descendants were soon to discover, he did much more than scatter promises.