



## Why Monotheism

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(Translated by Janet Lloyd)

*This essay is intended as a synthesis—necessarily quick and selective, aimed at the general, non-specialist, reader—of ideas I have developed in three books that have recently appeared in France under the general title *Aux origines du Dieu unique*.<sup>1</sup> Readers wishing to go more deeply into the questions I have broached here or to fill in the gaps of this account may refer to the books themselves.*

HOW FORTUNATE are scholars whose subject of research concerns the Greek or the Egyptian gods! For a very long time now, nobody has believed in either Zeus or Osiris, so there is little danger of those scholars' religious beliefs warping their judgment or of their critical analyses clashing with the faith of their readers. But it is a very different matter where the god whom we call "God" is concerned, for he is still followed by three billion of the world's believers. Nevertheless, in any scholarly approach to religions, it seems essential to treat the various deities all alike. Gods are historical figures that appear one day, live for a more or less extended period—as long as there exist people to believe in them—and that eventually disappear or merge with other gods.

The question that interests me is, since when—and why—did the Jews of Antiquity accept as dogma that only one god does or can exist, whereas up until that point, in all the societies known to us, the divine world was characterized by the diversity and plurality of supernatural beings.

Posed in the above terms, the question tends to provoke resistance (even in university circles, as I have learned to my cost). This is because in the eyes of believers it seems perfectly clear that, as men have always more or less obscurely sensed,

God, this god, the one true god, has existed for all eternity. Those who subscribe to the three monotheistic religions therefore consider it altogether to be expected that, just as the Bible states, God, for reasons best known to himself, should have revealed himself to one particular people, to wit the Hebrews, and, more precisely, to certain of its members, first Abraham, then Moses, so as to help the human race to gain clearer knowledge of his existence and his will.

However, that position, which seems unassailable from a believer's point of view, is today no longer tenable, bearing in mind the findings of scholarly research. In the first place, the very existence of Abraham and Moses has become questionable, for archaeologists have found no evidence at all of a whole people living for years in the Sinai desert. Furthermore, according to any reading of the Hebrew text that is innocent of preconceptions, that deity who spoke to Abraham and Moses was not the one true God. He was one god among many others, and his name was Jahveh (never mind how it was pronounced or how it is transcribed in European languages). That fact—and a fact is certainly what it is—is obscured by a retrospective illusion that projects all our beliefs in a single god on to the distant and largely mythical past. The illusion is perpetrated by a sleight of hand that, in translations of the Bible, replaces the word Jahveh by words such "God," "Our Lord," or "the Eternal One," all terms that are today used unequivocally to designate the God of monotheistic belief.<sup>2</sup>

What is the wording of the biblical account that tells of how this deity spoke to Abraham (then still known as Abram) for the very first time? "Jahveh had said to Abram: get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred and from thy father's house unto a land that I will shew thee. And I will make of thee a great nation and I will bless thee" (Genesis 12:1-2). Right from the first, then, Abraham is presented as the ancestor of a people (known to us as "the chosen people") promised a great destiny. And the blessing of this god—who at no time declares that he is the one true god—takes the

form of the gift to certain nomadic tribes of a "land" (known to us as "the Promised Land"), where they will be able to lead a settled life. This is the Bible's first mention of a covenant made between one particular god and one particular people, an alliance according to which, if this people remains faithful to this god, the god will favor it above all others. The Bible states that, several centuries later, this god renewed that covenant with Moses. When the god addresses the prophet for the first time, from within a burning bush that the flames do not consume, what does he say? He says: "I am the god of thy father, the god of Abraham, the god of Isaac and the god of Jacob" (Exodus 3:6.). He is still an ethnic god and, as an unprecedented mark of his favor, he reveals his true name, Jahveh, to Moses, telling him that his chief concern is to deliver his people from the slavery to which it is reduced in Egypt. Neither in this episode nor later, when Jahveh speaks to Moses on Mount Sinai, does the god ever present himself as the only god that exists, a universal god for all peoples who is concerned with the fate of the Human Race as a whole. In my work, *The Law of Moses*, I have shown that the prescriptions that the god dictates to the prophet, starting with the Ten Commandments, are not laws of universal morality but simply rules of conduct designed to ensure the unity and cohesion of the Hebrew people, with a view to ensuring its survival.

This type of religion is not specifically Israelite (the Israelites being the people descended from Jacob, whose surname was Israel). It is to be found throughout the ancient Near East, long before the Hebrews make their appearance in history, as is attested by numerous inscriptions discovered in Mesopotamia. In about 2025 BC, for example—close on eight centuries before Moses, if he existed and lived, as we are told, in the mid-thirteenth century—there were texts that mentioned a hitherto-unknown people that claimed to revere an equally unknown god, "Assur." Like Jahveh and the Israelites, this god and this people concluded an alliance, one so close that these people took the name of "Assyrians,"

meaning those faithful to the god Assur, and they called their capital "Assur," after him. A little later, in the same region, the Babylonians adopted Marduk as their protector-god. There are inscriptions and the remains of sanctuaries to prove that both these peoples concurrently also revered other deities. Theirs was a form of polytheism to which we today apply a term that has not yet found a place in dictionaries: "monolatry." Monolatry designates a cult addressed to one particular god, in preference to others, but without denying the existence of other gods, some of whom likewise sustain a special relationship with certain other peoples. When the Jews of Antiquity linked their fate to a god just as obscure as Marduk and Assur, but from whom they expected similar protection, they were simply imitating what they saw happening around them; they were no doubt hoping that an unknown or marginal god would be able to devote himself totally to them, whereas a famous god, solicited by many peoples, would be more likely to neglect them or treat others better than them. A minor biblical prophet, Micah, who lived in Jerusalem in the eighth century BC was well aware of this: "For all people will walk, every one in the name of his god, and we will walk in the name of Jahveh, our god for ever and ever" (Micah 4:5). There was nothing to stop the Israelites, just like the Assyrians and the Babylonians, from having other gods besides Jahveh, in particular Baal; they even recognized a goddess, Ashera, who was Jahveh's companion, as the Bible itself testifies if it is not read through deforming spectacles, and as also do inscriptions recently discovered in Israel, which mention "Jahveh and his Ashera."

Whatever the roles played by other gods, each people attributed its successes, especially military ones, to the god with whom it had formed an alliance, and each tended to think that its own god was the greatest of them all (otherwise, it would have chosen a different one). That is perfectly clear from the Mesopotamian inscriptions and equally so from the Bible. Following the crossing of the Red Sea, which is presented as a victory over the Egyptians, thanks to the miracu-

lous intervention of their god, Moses and his entire people sing a hymn of thanksgiving in which they exclaim, "Who is like unto thee, Jahveh, among the gods" (Exodus 15:11). There can be no doubt that such a formula belongs to a polytheistic world, unless, that is, one deforms the text by translating it as: "Who is like unto thee, O Lord?" (the Oecumenic Translation of the Bible) or as: "Qui est comme toi parmi les forts, Eternel?" (the French Rabbinic Bible: "Who is there like you among the strong, Eternal One?"). This passage shows, as many others do, that "Moses did not believe in God,"<sup>3</sup> as I somewhat provocatively put it in *L'Invention du monothéisme*, in order to make the point that the texts traditionally attributed to Moses—that is to say the first five books of the Bible (known as the Torah by the Jews and the Pentateuch by the Christians) are non-monotheistic virtually throughout.

In view of all this, how can the Jews be at the origin of belief in a single God? If that belief does not go back to Moses, when and where did it surface? To try to find an answer to that question, the only evidence we can turn to is the Bible, for no other people adopted this form of religion until the Jewish people did.

The case of the Pharaoh Akhenaton, who reigned one century before the period when Moses is supposed to have lived, constitutes no exception. According to modern Egyptologists, Akhenaton was a domineering pharaoh who decided to impose a personal and dynastic god, Aton, whose sole representative and interpreter he himself would be, thereby effectively marginalizing the priesthood, in particular that of the god Amon, in Thebes, who up until then had been all-powerful. But Aton was himself none other than Amon or Re; he was the very same supreme god of the Egyptian pantheon, represented by the Sun, but worshipped at different times under different names in different places, depending on the course of the sun there by day and by night. What is more, the hymns to Aton that are attributed to Akhenaton are very close copies of decidedly earlier hymns to Amon or Re, not

least in respect of their use of the adjective "unique" to qualify the god and to emphasize the exceptional nature of his extraordinary character (*not* to suggest that he was the only god that existed).<sup>4</sup> But anyway, the cult instituted by Akhenaton did not survive the death of the king. By a century later, it was forgotten and its temples had all been destroyed. Moses could not even have heard of him, let alone been inspired by his reform, given that the prophet himself was not monotheistic! Not until much later on was true monotheism introduced among the Jews, unaffected by any direct influence from other peoples; and only the Bible can provide clues as to how the belief arose.

This is the point at which to mention another contribution made by contemporary research. The Bible that is read today is a written document that is almost as late as monotheism itself, far less ancient than is suggested by tradition or even than was believed by most specialists thirty years ago. Israeli archaeology has reached the conclusion that before the ninth or even the eighth century BC, the Hebrews had no written language. So even if Jahveh had written down the Ten Commandments in Hebrew on two stone tablets, the Israelites would not have been able to decipher the text until several centuries later. As for Moses, the presumed scribe of the Torah, not only did he not believe in God, but he did not even know how to write! Today it is accepted that the first kernel of the Bible, the initial version of *Deuteronomy*, the fifth book of the present Pentateuch, dates from the time of King Josiah, who reigned in Jerusalem in the second half of the seventh century, before the town was captured by Nebuchadnezzar and the Hebrew notables were deported to Babylonia. The task of writing the Bible resumed during the half-century of exile and continued over several generations following the Return to Jerusalem. All the texts produced in this period (which lasted up until the end of the fifth century: in Greece, the age of Pericles) refer to Jahveh as the national god of the Israelites and mention the exclusive alliance contracted between this god and this people. We are bound to deduce that at the be-

ginning of the fourth century BC, the Jews had not yet become monotheists.<sup>5</sup> So when did this happen?

My thesis is that monotheistic belief appeared at the point when the patent failure of the alliance became too glaring to overlook and an explanation for it had to be found.

The Israelites remained confident of the superiority of their god so long as Jahveh continued to bring them startling successes: the escape from Egypt despite the Pharaoh's army in hot pursuit, the conquest of Canaan, and the establishment of a powerful kingdom ruled by two great kings, first David, then his son, Solomon. Such, at least, were the stories handed down from their ancestors. In reality, as has been mentioned above, there is no archaeological evidence of the flight from Egypt and the Hebrew people's forty year-long wanderings in the Sinai desert (no more is there any certain evidence of the Trojan War that is supposed to have taken place in this same period: like the Jews, the Greeks founded their distant past upon myths). What is more, Israeli archaeologists have discovered no evidence of the lightning attack and the conquest of Canaan that the Bible describes; rather, the occupation of the land appears to have been progressive and mainly peaceful, as seems the more likely given that there were already at least some Israelites living there who were native to the region. What is more surprising, given that we are now entering the historical period, is that no archaeological evidence and no epigraphical documentation at all have been found that can definitely be dated to the kingdom of David and Solomon.<sup>6</sup> In consequence, certain specialists in the field now even doubt not only the existence of Abraham and Moses, but also that of Solomon. In any case, if Solomon did exist, we should think of him as a village chieftain rather than the sovereign of an important kingdom, for the annals of neighboring lands make no mention of any such State, or even of Solomon's name. In the collective memory of the Hebrews, such a figure nevertheless acquired an emblematic stature. Now, according to the Bible—and from the ninth century BC onward its testimony can be backed up from other sources—

after the reign of Solomon, the Israelites suffered a long succession of misfortunes. Upon the king's death, most of the federated tribes—ten of the twelve, according to the Bible—refused to recognize his successor and seceded, creating a new State in the north of the country, with a new capital, Samaria, to compete with Jerusalem. Two rival kingdoms now faced each other and from time to time war broke out between them. For the authors of the Bible, this constituted the first catastrophe (*shoah*, in Hebrew) that the chosen people suffered. The more populated, stronger, and wealthier of the two kingdoms soon fell to the Assyrians who, toward the end of the eighth century, seized Samaria, deported part of the population and annexed the country to their Empire. This was the second catastrophe in the history of the Jews. The third came when, in the early sixth century, the Babylonians finished off the southern kingdom, destroying Jerusalem and deporting the country's entire elite class. The Israelites had now lost all of the land that they believed their god had given to their ancestors. Toward the end of the sixth century, when the Persians conquered the Babylonians, they did perhaps have reason to hope that those in exile would be liberated, that some would return to Jerusalem, and that they would be able to re-establish the vast kingdom of Solomon. At any rate, the biblical texts dating from the Exile testify to that dream of theirs, particularly the prophecies of Jeremiah, who had at first remained in Jerusalem but had later fled to Egypt, and also those of Ezekiel, who had been deported to Babylon. However, it was not to be. Throughout the two centuries-long duration of the Persian Empire, the inhabitants of Judea simply vegetated, without a king, without an army, without independence, in a tiny corner of the Achaemenid Empire, which extended from the Indus to the Nile and from the Persian gulf to the Black Sea, encompassing the part of the Greek world that included the cities of Miletus and Ephesus. The Persian inscriptions that list the various peoples co-opted into the empire mention the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Egyptians, and even the Arabs, but never the Jews. In the

fifth century, Herodotus, the Greek ethnologist/historian, who stayed in Persia, visited Egypt, and traveled as far as Phoenicia (in what is now Lebanon), right on the doorstep of Israel, had never even heard of the Jews, their religion, or the temple that they had rebuilt in Jerusalem upon their return from Babylon. Nevertheless, it was in this period, under the domination of the Persians that the Jews conceived of an entirely new religion, monotheism.

How can we come to terms with this? First, even in the case of believers, by jettisoning the idea of Revelation and sacred books. After all, in the sixteenth century AD the Christians had to admit that the earth moved round the sun and, three centuries later, that human beings were not born all of a sudden, exactly as they are now, but were the ultimate fruit of a very long evolution of species. Now they will also have to accept the fact that there is no biblical text that states that God—the one and only God—at one date or another made himself known to an Israelite, announcing: "There is but one God; and that is the religious Truth. To you I entrust the mission of setting down this revelation in writing, convincing your people of it and diffusing it to the rest of the human race." The few verses that are put forward to lend credit to that reading were lifted out of context and misinterpreted. In past works of mine, I have cited many examples of such verses and restored their literal meaning, which invariably shows that what they refer to is a particular god who is exclusively preoccupied with a particular people, namely the Israelites, as an ethnic group. My considered opinion is that the succession of disasters suffered by this ethnic group, despite its alliance with a deity presented as the greatest of the gods, is the source of the monotheistic revolution. But at this point, we must turn back in time.

The first "catastrophe" in the Israelite national history—the split of Solomon's kingdom into two rival States—was, after the event, explained by biblical writers as a consequence of the infidelity of the sovereign who, they claimed, at the end of his life allowed the cult of other deities in

Jerusalem itself (1 Kings 11). The second "catastrophe"—the fall of the kingdom of Samaria, the larger of the two States—was also attributed to the infidelity of its kings who were said to have introduced the cult of foreign deities, in particular Baal, who competed with the god of the Israelite forefathers. In this way, rather than cast doubt on the power of Jahveh, the biblical writers incriminated his people. Such a reaction was certainly not peculiar to the Hebrew people. We know of more ancient texts, in Mesopotamia, in which cities likewise explain the reverses they have suffered as punishments that their god has inflicted upon them. Neither peoples as a whole nor individuals are ever ready to lay the blame on their own particular god and abandon him. In order to continue to be able to believe in him, they prefer to credit him with not only their victories, but also their defeats. The view of the Bible authors was that if "Jahveh's people" suffered misfortunes, those misfortunes were the work of Jahveh. People now therefore endeavored to understand what faults the ancients had committed, so that they themselves could avoid doing likewise. It was apparently under the reign of Josiah, in about 620 BC, that, in the hope of averting from Jerusalem the fate that Samaria had suffered, the idea that Jahveh was a jealous god came to prevail: Jahveh could tolerate no rivals for the veneration that he demanded from the Israelites. This turn of events in itself, incidentally, proves that up until then the cult of Jahveh had certainly coexisted alongside cults of other gods, as was customary in the monolatry of Near Eastern national gods (as has been noted above). Monolatry is but one of the modalities taken by polytheistic belief and the reform introduced by Josiah, who insisted that his people now worship Jahveh alone and, what is more, do so in one place only, namely the temple of Jerusalem, was simply a new variant of the earlier form of monolatry. It is mistaken to date the birth of monotheism to this period, as some scholars do,<sup>7</sup> for in doing so they confuse monolatry and monotheism, whereas in truth only the latter declares that there can be only one god.

In the light of the new views that appeared at the time of Josiah, it was said that Jahveh had made use of other peoples—the most cruel of them—to punish the Israelites for their infidelity. The double advantage of this idea was that, while it maintained the presumed omnipotence of Jahveh, it did not attribute the success of those enemy peoples to the power of their own particular gods. To ensure that no one, either among enemy peoples or among the Israelites themselves, could possibly impute the disasters suffered by the latter to any gods other than Jahveh, biblical writers—such as Jeremiah (chapter 51)—declared that, after serving as tools in the hands of Jahveh, those enemies would, in their turn, be punished for having shed the blood of Jahveh's people. History appeared to corroborate that belief. For after destroying the kingdom of Samaria, the Assyrians were crushed by the Babylonians. And as for the Babylonians, after destroying the kingdom of Jerusalem, they themselves were defeated and wiped out by the Persians. But with the Persians, everything was to change. For the Persians, unintentionally and unwittingly gave the lie to the biblical ideology.

Far from serving Jahveh's designs by punishing the Israelites, in 539 the Persians liberated them from their Babylonian exile and allowed them to return to Jerusalem and there rebuild their temple. Better still, they actually financed that undertaking and exempted the Israelite priesthood from taxation. Even better, a few decades later, Persian kings entrusted certain Judaeans still in exile and close to their court with missions to travel to Jerusalem. There, they were to provide sorely needed assistance to the Returned community, which was impoverished and in dire disarray. In the mid-fifth century, the king's own steward, Nehemiah, carried out two such missions and later, probably in the early years of the fourth century, a scribe-priest named Esdras arrived in Jerusalem. There he played an important role, writing down the laws that were attributed to Moses and that the Persians themselves observed in all matters concerning the Jews (this was now the name by which the Judaeans and, more gener-

ally, all members of the Israelite ethnic group were known). In short, the Persians' treatment of the Jews was so irreproachable that the Bible refers to Cyrus as a Messiah, that is to say "one anointed by Jahveh,"<sup>8</sup> and for a while the Jews even thought that the Persians would recognize that it was to the god of the Jews that they owed their successes, and would pay him homage. But nothing of the kind happened. The Persians' behavior toward the Jews was just the same as and neither more nor less generous than their behavior toward all the other peoples in the Empire: they respected the religions and the customs of all their subject peoples. In an inscription on a clay tablet discovered in Babylon in 1879, a text declares that Marduk himself, the country's national god, ordered Cyrus, a foreigner, to punish the king of the Babylonians for his infidelity by seizing his capital city. Then, in the next part of the text, Cyrus confirms that he reveres Marduk, calling him his "Lord," and announces that he has liberated the deported peoples—without, however, mentioning the Jews specifically.<sup>9</sup> This attitude of the Persians which, according to the Bible, closely resembles the attitude that they manifested toward the Judaeans, also corresponds to the policy that they adopted toward Egypt, once they had conquered that country. A statue of Darius, discovered in 1972 in Susa, his Iranian capital, bears an inscription in hieroglyphs in which the king of the Persians presents himself, like the pharaohs, as the son of Re, the supreme god of the Egyptians. But other inscriptions, written in Persian, in Elamite and in Akkadian, meanwhile pay homage to Ahura-Mazda, "the great god who created both this earth below and the heavens above, who created man and well-being for man, and who made Darius king." Further on, Darius declares: "Let Ahura-Mazda protect me and all that I have done."<sup>10</sup> Clearly, the Persians did place themselves under the protection of the principle deities of all the peoples who became part of their empire, but it was to their own national god, Ahura-Mazda, that they attributed their successes. To this god, they attributed the very same powers, in particular that

of creation, as the Jews attributed to Jahveh. But there was a crucial difference between the two deities: the power attributed to Ahura-Mazda was credible, since it had apparently enabled his people to conquer a vast territory, whereas the power of Jahveh was seriously questionable, given that his people was moldering in a tiny corner of the Empire, as an obscure vassal.

Could it be hoped that the domination of the Persians would be as ephemeral as that of the Assyrians and the Babylonians, and that Jahveh would then annihilate the Persians and restore a great kingdom to the Jews? Even that hope was a slender one. After using the Assyrians and the Babylonians as his tools, Jahveh had punished them for oppressing the Jews. But for what could Jahveh punish the Persians? There was not a thing for which he could reproach them. Should it therefore be concluded that the greatest of the gods was not Jahveh after all, but Ahura Mazda? For some of the Jewish people, the temptation to do exactly that must have been great. The Bible records how, in different circumstances, Israelites had indeed rallied to the gods of their conquerors. Around the end of the eighth century, after being defeated by the Aramaeans (the Syrians), a king of Jerusalem had said to himself: "Because the gods of the kings of Syria help them, therefore will I sacrifice to them, that they may help me" (2 Chronicles 28:23). Plenty of peoples in the world—especially in this region—had disappeared along with their respective religions because they had bowed to other peoples and adopted the latter's beliefs and customs. But among the Jews, at this time religion and national identity had become so intertwined that to abandon Jahveh would have been the equivalent of collective suicide. Their entire mythical history, now set down in writing, and all the words of their prophets repeatedly told them that they were not like others, that they had to keep themselves apart from foreign nations (the *goyim*) because they had been promised a great destiny by their god. "The people shall dwell alone and shall not be reckoned among the nations": such is the image that they



present of themselves in the Bible (Numbers 23:9). Their laws, first and foremost their dietary prohibitions, contributed to maintaining this separation: "I am Jahveh your God, which have separated you from other people. Ye shall therefore put difference between clean beasts and unclean, and between unclean fowls and clean; and ye shall not make your souls abominable by beast or fowl, or by any manner of living thing that creepeth on the ground, which I have separated from you as unclean" (Leviticus 20:24-25).<sup>11</sup> To renounce this ideology that had enabled them to bear so many setbacks and several full-blown catastrophes would have been to renounce being themselves. To admit they had been mistaken would have condemned them to disappear. In order to avoid that fate, this people's guides had for many years been endeavoring to emend their initial religion. Under Josiah, they had decreed that the national god would tolerate no rival, and all the foreign gods had been ejected from his kingdom. After the return from Babylon, Esdras had decided that the Jewish ethnic group should be purged so as to be worthy of once again being Jahveh's people; accordingly, all foreign women, together with their children, had been ejected, after which mixed marriages were strictly prohibited (Esdras 10 and Nehemiah 13). In the rebuilt temple many sacrifices were made and many purificatory rites were performed, all designed to show respect for the countless commandments said to have been prescribed by Jahveh to the prophet Moses, who had noted them down; now there were scrolls from which those laws could be taught to all the Jews. What more could they do to obtain pardon for the mistakes made by their forefathers, be restored to grace in Jahveh's eyes and once again become a great people in a great land? Yet there was no denying that all those reforms and all those efforts had achieved nothing. The oppressive and wretched conditions in which the Israelite people were still struggling to live had in no way improved. Had the Jews been mistaken to stake their all on Jahveh? Over several generations, real and deep-seated doubts continued to spread. A psalm rewrit-

ten in the Persian period conveys some idea of the people's state of mind: "Thou hast cast us off and put us to shame . . . Thou makest us a reproach to our neighbors, a scorn and a derision to them that are round about us . . . All this is come upon us, yet we have not forgotten thee, neither have we dealt falsely in thy covenant . . . Awake, why sleepest thou, O Lord?" (Psalms 44:9-24). The explanation that laid the blame on the people themselves was no longer acceptable and some of the voices that were raised even dared to question the standing of Jahveh himself. Doubts concerning the real power of the god were the more inevitable in the face of the ongoing triumphs of the Persians, triumphs that involved no crimes of a kind to provoke Jahveh's anger. Besides, the people as a whole were bound eventually to realize that, as Nehemiah, living in the Susa court, was certainly well aware, the Persians attributed their success to the power of their own god Ahura Mazda, and had good reason to do so. This situation, which persisted throughout the two centuries-long Achaemenid Empire, cast a shadow over the ideology that had allowed the Jews of Antiquity to explain their misfortunes without bringing into question either the power of their god or the alliance upon which their identity was founded. We possess virtually no documentation on this period: in that respect, it resembles the "dark ages" that preceded the renaissance of the Greek civilization, in the eighth century. But in the course of it, an intellectual crisis seems to have taken shape and deepened among the Jewish people. To overcome it, there were only two alternatives: either abandon traditional doctrine and sacrifice the past, or else find a radically new idea that could save both the Jewish people and their god. That idea was monotheism. There is no way of knowing when and by whom the idea was first formulated. The same can often be said of the scientific revolutions that arise and resolve the crises in which research has become bogged down. It is a parallel that I have developed elsewhere, using the analyses of Thomas S. Kuhn.<sup>12</sup> It took time for the theory of monotheism to gain ground, more time for it to win over



supporters, and yet more for it finally to obtain acceptance from an entire people. I believe that this happened either in the second half of the fourth century or else at the beginning of the third, when the Greeks supplanted the Persians, without making any difference at all to the situation of the Jews.

The Jews' adoption of monotheism totally changed their view of the world. There was no longer any reason to interpret History in terms of rivalries between various gods, each of which protected his own particular people and came to its aid. In particular, it no longer made any sense to compare the god of the Jews and the god of the Persians, for they were one and the same, a single god who, in accordance with designs known only to himself, favored now one people, now another. This truly revolutionary new discovery, perceived by the Jews and them alone, afforded them a means to explain their misfortunes both past and present, while at the same time preserving the hope that they would one day recover the favor of the god who had brought them out of Egypt and presented them with a great country, where they had set up a powerful kingdom. Little by little, people ceased to refer to this god as Jahveh, as they used to when a proper name was necessary to distinguish him from other gods. Now he would be called simply "God" (*elohim*) or "Lord" (*adonai*). By the third century BC, when the Jews of Alexandria translated the Torah into Greek for the Jews of Egypt who no longer knew Hebrew, the monotheistic mutation was complete. In the Septuagint, "Jahveh" has disappeared altogether and is replaced by *theos* ("God") or *kurios* ("Lord").<sup>13</sup>

The Jews thus came eventually to change their religion and they did so without attributing the innovation to any divine inspiration. They believed (or, in order to reconcile the present with the past, allowed it to be believed) that this new view, held to be the religious truth, was not new at all, but went right back to Sinai. Accordingly, they introduced a number of emendations to the text of the Bible: for instance, they rewrote the first chapter of *Genesis*;<sup>14</sup> but in most essentials they respected the text that was already fixed and was con-

sidered sacred because it was God who had dictated it to Moses. Virtually all the Hebrew text of the Bible that can be read today therefore predates the period when belief in a single God became a dogma in the religion of the Jews—a whole millennium after Moses (if, that is, the prophet really was a historical figure). The new dogma was one that the Jews had invented in order to extricate Jahveh and, with him, themselves from the abyss into which they had fallen together.

The above hypothesis makes it possible to understand how it was, subsequently, that this one and only God was always considered by the Jews to be first and foremost the God of the Jews, rather than simply the God of all peoples. That they did indeed do so is shown by the fact that, even at the beginning of our own era, the Temple of Jerusalem, said to be the one place where the cult of the Sole God could be celebrated, was reserved for the Jews alone. Archaeologists have discovered two panels upon which the following text had been inscribed, in both Greek and Latin: "Let no stranger pass beyond the balustrade and the precinct that surrounds the sanctuary. Anyone caught doing so would have only himself to blame for the death by which he would be punished."<sup>15</sup>

It was the earliest Christians who severed the ethnic roots of God. Above all, Paul, who was born a Jew, declares again and again in his pastoral letters that since there is only one God, he must be the God of all peoples and all individuals, so there is no reason to make any distinction between Jews and non-Jews.<sup>16</sup>

However, from the moment, at the beginning of the fourth century AD, when a Roman emperor, Constantine, converted to Christianity, the deity known as God progressively turned into the God of first the Romans, then the Europeans and the peoples that they made their subjects. In other words, God once more became the mark identifying, no longer just one particular ethnic group, as is still the case in Judaism, but a whole collection of nations united by the worship of the Son of God. Meanwhile, in the seventh century, Islam, while emphatically declaring its attachment to the one and only God

borrowed from the Jews and the Christians, triumphed by federating previously rival Arab tribes around the teachings of Mohammed and leading them into the conquest of a vast empire.

The fact that, no matter what theologians declare, monotheism cannot do without national roots explains how it is that today still, peoples who all claim to revere the same God nevertheless continue to wage pitiless warfare in order to get their own concept of that one and only God to prevail.

#### NOTES

1. See my trilogy, *Aux origines du Dieu unique: L'Invention du monothéisme* (Paris 2002); *La loi de Moïse* (2003); *Vie et mort dans la Bible* (2004).

2. Another subterfuge consists in designating this god by the four letters JHVH, the "divine tetragrammaton" used in the Bible. But the Hebrew language only notes down the consonants and semi-consonants in the case of this god, as in the case of other gods, or indeed that of every word in the language! It is because of a purported prohibition to pronounce this name, "The Name," that rabbis transcribe it in European languages as JHVH and then pronounce it "Adonai" ("Lord") rather than Jahveh. In truth, however, that prohibition never appears in the Bible. See *L'Invention du monothéisme* (note 1), 108–10 and 123–24, and also *La loi de Moïse*, 45–47.

3. Traditional translations have Moses say: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord" (KJV, Deuteronomy 6:4). In reality, this verse, re-set in its context, has the following sense: *Hear, Israel, Jahveh* (not God or Lord) *is* (or "will be," in other words "should be," "ought to be"; the word "is" is understood) *our god, Jahveh alone* (the Hebrew word "ehad" means "one" but also "alone"). This verse repeats with variation (as is, however, often the case in the Bible) a preceding verse in which Jahveh himself says to the people (to "Israel"): "You shall not have other gods before me" (Deut. 5:7). There is here the expression of an exclusivist monolatry (*we ought not to set up rivals to our national god*), which is not monotheism (the conviction that the rivals do not exist). On this point, see my commentary in *La Loi de Moïse* (note 1), 37–38.

4. See *L'Invention du monothéisme* (note 1), 87–89.

5. Certain specialists in the Bible or in Judaism continue to maintain, based on a section of the book of Isaiah, specifically Isaiah 44:6, that monotheism had been affirmed during the Babylonian Exile, in the sixth century BC. But these texts are not Isaiah's and mention "Cyrus" (Isa. 45:1), the Persian king who freed the deportees two centuries after the era in which the prophet himself lived. The passages in question have been interpolated in the collection of Isaiah after the Return from Babylon. See my discussion of this

question in my book, *L'Invention du monothéisme* (note 1), 89–91. The best proof that monotheism does not date from the Exile are the books of Ezra and Nehemiah which record the life of the Jews who returned to Judea in the fifth and the beginning of the fourth centuries and nowhere say that Jahveh is the only god who exists. In any case, suppose that monotheism goes back to the Exile (sixth century) or even to the epoch of King Josias (seventh century)—the thinking of still other researchers who confuse exclusivist monolatry with monotheism—it remains that Moses (thirteenth century) was not a monotheist, which suffices to raze the traditional foundations of the three religions of a sole God and the idea of Revelation.

6. See Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed* (New York 2001).

7. In particular the authors of *The Bible Unearthed*, chapter 11.

8. This reference to Cyrus appears in the collection of prophecies attributed to Isaiah, who lived two centuries earlier than the king of the Persians!

9. See Pierre Lecoq, *Les Inscriptions de la Perse achéménide* (Paris 1997), 181–85.

10. See Pierre Briant, *Histoire de l'empire perse* (Paris 1996), 492, and Lecoq, *Les Inscriptions de la Perse achéménide* (note 9), 246–47.

11. See my article, "Sémiotique de la nourriture dans la Bible." *Annales*, (July–August 1973). An English translation is to be found in R. Forster and O. Ranum, eds., *Food and Drink in History*, vol. 5 (Baltimore 1979); in *The New York Review of Books*, 14 June 1979; and in C. Counihan and P. Van Esterik, eds., *Food and Culture: A Reader* (New York and London 1997). I reworked and expanded this study in *Vie et Mort dans la Bible* (note 1), 13–29.

12. See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago 1962 and 1970); and Jean Soler, *L'Invention du monothéisme* (note 1), 91–93.

13. See in *L'Invention du monothéisme* (note 1) the chapter entitled "L'effacement de Iahvé," 107–10.

14. See in *L'Invention du monothéisme* (note 1) the chapter entitled "Des retouches monothéistes," 99–102.

15. See *Vie et mort dans la Bible* (note 1), 89.

16. See in particular Romans 3:29–30.