

Chapter Two

New Directions

Eventually the beliefs that had served people well enough for a very long time began to lose their credibility. The displacement of the old gods, however, was a long and drawn-out affair, beginning almost unnoticed in the eighth and seventh centuries BC and culminating more than a thousand years later in a spasm of violence against all but one of the old gods and against what was left of their establishments. By the time Muhammad died in 632 much of the world had embraced the great religions that are still familiar today: Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Except for Buddhism, each of these religions is founded on a sacred text, and each may therefore be described as a scriptural religion.

The centuries between ca. 800 and 200 BC saw not only the beginnings of Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism and Confucianism, but also the development of secularism in Greece and of monotheism among at least a few Judaeans. The period was called *die Achsenzeit* by Karl Jaspers in his influential book, *The Origin and Goal of History*. The German word *Achsen* means “axle.” Let us imagine history as a horse-drawn carriage, proceeding steadily westward. At a certain point the driver turns the horses sharply to the north, the front axle of the carriage swivels to the perpendicular, and the carriage is now moving in a very different direction. As Jaspers saw it, the *Achsenzeit* (“axial time” or “pivotal period”) turned the world away from its traditional path and set it off in the direction that it has followed ever since. Religious evolution has of course continued down to the present time, but the term, *Achzenzeit*, is nevertheless useful as a catch-all for the profound reorientation that took place in the first millennium BC.¹ Although Islam, Christianity and even Judaism did not take shape until long after the *Achsenzeit* was over, each of the three scriptural religions is deeply dependent upon the earlier period.

The old beliefs about the Afterlife

The shift from the old gods to the new religions had much to do with the mystery of life and death. In the old view, which began as far back in the paleolithic period as we can probe, a person was indistinguishable from his or her body. This perception corresponded exactly to common sense, but had as its corollary a belief that after death the person went with the body into the grave. The dead went down into the ground, into the Underworld, and there joined all those who had preceded them in death. What was left of a person, as the Greeks in Homer’s time saw it, was merely his or her *psychē*, which for Homer meant not “soul” but “ghost.” All that the *psychē* or ghost had in the Underworld was the grave itself, along with whatever his or her family had placed alongside the body in the grave. The grave goods - clothes, pottery, a few metal artifacts, some of them decorative and others utilitarian - provided the deceased with a dim semblance of the material comforts that he or she had enjoyed in life. Occasionally, when a king or a noble died the survivors might slaughter a team of horses, or even a concubine and a few servants, to accompany the deceased into the Underworld. But those companions were scant comfort, and everyone knew that even the most fortunate of the dead would find little joy in the

Underworld. Existence there was just as material as life here, and just as dependent on physical goods, but there was only earth to eat and dirty water to drink.

In short, so far as most people believed, the Afterlife was sad and shadowy, something to be postponed as long as possible. As Homer told it, when Odysseus made his journey to the Underworld and there met the ghost of Achilles, the ghost assured Odysseus that it was better by far to be a serf in the land of the living than to be king of all the dead. The Greek term for the Underworld was *Hades*, and the Hebrew word was *Sheol*. When a man died in Israel or Judah he was “gathered to his fathers” in *Sheol*. How *Sheol* was imagined can be seen in the advice that the author of Qoheleth (Ecclesiastes) 9:10 gave to his contemporaries: “Whatever task lies to your hand, do it with might; because in Sheol, for which you are bound, there is neither doing nor thinking, neither understanding nor wisdom” (OSB). In the Germanic languages spoken in pre-Christian times the word *hell* likewise was simply the destination for the dead, all the dead, irrespective of their virtues and vices (the word *hell* was related etymologically to the word *hole*, and signified merely the hole in the ground into which the dead body was lowered).

New beliefs in India

A very different view of the Afterlife began in India. Ca. 1500 BC the Indus valley had been conquered by Aryan speakers from western Iran. Probably the Aryans had worshiped a few chthonic and local gods at home, but when they left home to conquer a far-off land the only gods who could accompany them were sky gods: *devas*, a word cognate with the Latin *dei* and meaning something like “bright ones.” With their gods now all in the heavens, and with their traditional burial grounds a thousand miles away, the Aryan rulers of India seem to have come to believe in a celestial or heavenly Afterlife at least for themselves, although perhaps not for their subjects.

The new belief was bound up with a new funerary ritual. Initially the Aryan conquerors inhumed their dead under a barrow, but soon they abandoned inhumation in favor of cremation. Cremation was costly, especially in regions with little timber to fuel a fire of sufficient intensity to burn the corpse. During the Harappan civilization that had flourished in western India during the third and early second millennium BC Indians always buried their dead, and for most Indians inhumation continued long after the arrival of the Aryans. But the practice of cremation spread south and east from the Panjab, and by the early first millennium BC had reached the Ganges valley.² In the hymns of the Rig-veda cremation is clearly preferred, although other rites were still common, and in historical times cremation has been the standard practice for all Hindus. In the second millennium BC the Aryan survivors would gather up the bones and ashes of the deceased and place them in a burial urn, but eventually the practice was to throw the bones into the Ganges or another great river.

The smoke of the cremating fire carried the dead Aryan up to the heavens, to the “World of the Fathers” (one notion seems to have been that the heavenly home was the moon), whereas everyone else at death went down to the “House of Clay,” a gloomy place which certainly was underground.³ For an Aryan who had been guilty of great wrongs, however, cremation was insufficient to bring him to the World of the Fathers, and he joined the masses in the House of

Clay. The World of the Fathers may have been something of a Valhalla, where the dead heroes spent their eternity in feasting, wenching, and chariot racing. Despite the anticipation of such carnal pleasures, belief in a heavenly Afterlife carried with it the corollary that a person was in some fundamental sense separable from, or distinct from, his or her body. Vedic Sanskrit had a word - *ātman* - that meant something akin to both “self” and “soul,” and the Aryans seem to have believed that when an Aryan hero died and his body was burned his *ātman* ascended to the World of the Fathers.

The early Upanishads

Some time around 600 BC a few mystics in the Ganges valley of eastern India took all of this a few steps further. The new teachings appear in some of the earliest of the Vedic Upanishads. The various Hindu sects today have inherited more than a thousand Upanishads, and of these only a few more than a hundred (108 according to an oft-quoted enumeration) were transmitted through the millennia with the Vedic corpus and are accepted by all Hindus as *shruti*, or sacred literature. Even most of these “canonical” Upanishads are relatively late, and scarcely more than a dozen predate the great expansion of Buddhism in the third century BC. These twelve or thirteen early Upanishads are prose homilies that for Hindus signify and provide the *Vedanta*, or “End of the Veda.” Hindus see them, that is, as explaining or extracting the “true” meaning from the Vedas (which on the surface are tedious hymns and prayers to accompany sacrifices to an obsolete pantheon), much in the way that the Talmud and the letters of Paul provide the “true” meaning of Leviticus for Jewish and Christian readers respectively. Like the four Vedas, the Upanishads were orally composed in Vedic Sanskrit (through most of the first millennium BC nobody in India was literate), but at a much later stage of the language’s development than that at which the Rig-veda was composed. Of the Upanishads that underlie the *Vedanta* the earliest may date to the seventh or sixth century BC. They purport to be the teachings of famous sages who withdrew to the forest for contemplation and who there attracted a circle of hearers. The word *upanishad* meant “session” or “those who sit near,” and suggests a community of teacher and students.

The mystics’ principal concern was with the *ātman* and its fate after death. A few Indians resigned themselves to the pessimistic conclusion that death is the end of everything: there is no Afterlife at all, and the *ātman* perishes in the air just as the body perishes in the fire. But this materialist view seems to have been shared by only a tiny sect, the followers of Ajita Keshakambalin, who according to tradition was a contemporary of the Buddha.⁴ The mystics went off in an opposite direction. They looked forward to an ultimately blissful destination for the *ātman*, although not to the riotous World of the Fathers that had earlier been envisaged. Instead, the early Upanishads taught that in entering a state of bliss the *ātman* ceases to exist as an *ātman* and discovers itself as *Brahman*, the essence of the world’s reality. The forest sages taught, in other words, that the “self” is not a permanent entity, but a temporary phenomenon. What my senses identify as my “self” - my *ātman*, which is the “me” behind or apart from my body - is not a self at all but a microcosmic expression of *Brahman*, the very principle of being. The *ātman*, or self, is thus unreal, an illusion of our physical senses, and what alone is real is *Brahman*. The Upanishads do not present *Brahman* as God, but as an impersonal and ineffable reality that “fills all space and time. This is the ground beyond and below all forms and

phenomena, and from it the whole Universe, including the gods themselves, has emerged.”⁵ In contrast to *Brahman* the perceptible and sensible objects of the material world are reduced to mere appearances, what Greek philosophers would call *phainomena*, and we can only apprehend reality by thinking past the appearances.

What the hermit sages taught was neither philosophy nor religion, but was of fundamental importance for both. The sages promised that once a person understood the identity of his or her self with *Brahman* the person would be suffused in a profound peace, having come to a correct understanding of the sensible world and having gained an unshakeable serenity in the tumultuous world of appearances. The Upanishad acceptance and welcoming of the annihilation of the self has for two and a half millennia distinguished Indian from Western religious and philosophic thought. Taking their cue from Plato, Christian theologians from Origen to modern times have enhanced the self by equating it with a “soul,” which - far from being annihilated at death - is eternal. In India too, however, the early Upanishad doctrine was not something that most people found satisfying without qualification. It was therefore soon accompanied by the belief in transmigration. This belief prefaced the *ātman*’s ultimate bliss with an intermediate and difficult sojourn. At death, the later Upanishads taught, a person’s *ātman* enters another body, newborn, and pays for the evil *karma* (deeds, action) done in the preceding life. When you die your *ātman* may enter another human, or an animal, or even a fish or an insect. This belief in transmigration was satisfying because it guaranteed punishment for evildoers. If at death the *ātman* of the bad person and the good person alike simply dissolves into the bliss of *Brahman*, then there is little incentive for the bad person to improve his or her behavior.

The decline of sacrifice: Hinduism, and the rise of Buddhism and Jainism

The new ideas about the Afterlife had a deeply unsettling effect on religion in India. By the fifth century BC speculation about the identity of one’s *ātman* with *Brahman* had helped to bring into being both Jainism and Buddhism, and as the majority of Indians began to borrow from the new teachings their traditional Vedic religion began its transformation into Hinduism. At the same time, animal sacrifice ceased to be the central act of worship. A belief in reincarnation discouraged the eating of meat: believing that an animal possessed a “soul” just like their own, Indians were as inhibited from eating the flesh of animals as civilized people everywhere are from cannibalism.

The obsolescence of animal sacrifice occurred gradually and over centuries. Although most Hindus suppose that animal sacrifices had “always” been prohibited in India, it is quite clear that in the second millennium BC cattle and other animals were regularly sacrificed, a portion of the meat was given to the gods (by the medium of smoke), and the rest of the meat was eaten by the worshipers.⁶ In contrast, by the third century BC sacrifices had been mostly abandoned, and “sacred cows” were much in evidence.⁷ The rejection of animal sacrifice distinguishes Hinduism from the Vedic religion out of which it evolved. By the middle of the first millennium BC the Vedic religion, which had been centered squarely on sacrifice, was being reinterpreted and reshaped. The major animal sacrifices were progressively abandoned, and in their place worshipers offered to the new gods - Vishnu, Shiva, Brahmā (a personal god, not to be confused with the abstract Brahman), Kali and Prajapati - sacrifices of flowers, cakes, and

ghee, a butter-oil from which the solid fat has been removed.

Buddhists and Jainists saw no purpose at all in sacrifices, and because of their reverence for life and consciousness both systems advocated a vegetarian diet. Siddhārtha Gautama, who was to become the *Buddha* (“enlightened one” or “awakened one”) is traditionally said to have been born ca. 560 BC, although historians suspect that date may be too high.⁸ And Vardhamāna, the *Mahāvīra* or “Great Man” who founded Jainism, is supposed to have been the Buddha’s contemporary. Espousing the belief in transmigration, Buddhists and Jainists preached the virtue of *ahimsa*, or non-violence, to be applied not just to people but to all living and conscious beings. The broom was the symbol of Jainism, the Jainist sweeping the path in front of him as he walked, lest he tread upon the ants or other tiny creatures in his path.

Both Buddhism and Jainism were essentially atheistic: that is, they disregarded the old Vedic gods and presented a view of reality in which gods played no part. Hinduism, in contrast, was theistic. Although assimilating the Upanishad teachings about *ātman* and *Brahman*, and the more popular teachings about transmigration, Hinduism retained the old Vedic gods and added a considerable cast of new ones. Hindus regard the four Vedas as true and sacred texts, but Buddhists and Jainists do not. It is remarkable that the Buddhist and Hindu traditions were able to live side by side without conflict or even, it seems, competition. Buddhists and Jainists undoubtedly perceived themselves as more enlightened than the average Indian, but did not attack the old gods and did not feel compelled to convert the theists to their own views. On the other side, although the traditionalists (whose religious system would over the centuries become Hinduism) may have found Buddhism and Jainism somewhat eccentric, they seem to have regarded Buddhists and Jainists as morally admirable and not as a threat to the Vedic tradition.

Iran: the prophet Zarathushtra and the beginnings of Mazdaism (“Zoroastrianism”)

Religious changes in Iran are associated with the prophet Zarathushtra or “Zoroaster” as the Greeks distorted the name. The prophet tried to prohibit the worship of the *daevas* and the sacrificing of cattle. The religion that looks back to Zarathushtra as its founder is conventionally called “Zoroastrianism,” but more properly should be called “Mazdaism,” after Ahura Mazda, whom the Mazdians worship. This religion did not receive its classical form until the third century CE, but its roots go much further back. Unfortunately, almost nothing is known about Zarathushtra. Evidently he lived in northeastern Iran: the language of his poetry - Old Avestan - was an eastern Iranian dialect, quite different from western Iranian dialects such as Persian. Because no other text in Old Avestan has survived, translations of the poetry are problematic, and depend largely on inferences made from Vedic Sanskrit.

It is possible that Zarathushtra was born as late as ca. 600 BC, but his dates are utterly uncertain and on linguistic grounds some specialists have placed him before the middle of the second millennium BC, an improbably early date. If we put more weight on Zarathushtra’s religious teachings than on his language, we would date him after 1000 BC, and perhaps to the early stages of the *Achsenzeit* proposed by Karl Jaspers. Zarathushtra’s denunciation of animal sacrifice may well have preceded the anti-sacrificial movement in India, but is unlikely to have been more than a century or two earlier. We reach firm chronological ground only in the late

sixth century BC, when inscriptions show that Darius, king of Persia, was a devout worshiper of Ahura Mazda. My own guess is that Zarathushtra lived in the ninth or eighth century BC.⁹

The traditional religion of the Iranians, or the religion that Zarathushtra resolved to reform, evidently was focused on the *daevas*, the “bright ones” of the Indo-Iranian pantheon (*devas* in Vedic Sanskrit).¹⁰ The *daevas* must have included Mitra (Mithras, as spelled in Greek and Latin), Varuna, Indra, the Nasatya Twins, and perhaps the Ashvins. All of these deities except the Ashvins are mentioned in a vassal treaty to which an Indo-Iranian king of Mittani took an oath in the fourteenth century BC.¹¹ The traditional religion included much animal sacrifice and also the drinking of *haoma*, the intoxicating juice pressed from the ephedra plant. At the sacrifices, we may again assume, the worshipers chanted hymns such as those that have come down to us in the Rig-veda.

In the Yasna (“liturgical text” or “worship text”) portion of the Avesta, the sacred book of the Mazdians, are included seventeen of Zarathushtra’s poems. The Old Avestan language in which these poems, or Gathas, were composed is quite distinct from the Younger Avestan language used everywhere else in the Avesta. Zarathushtra’s Gathas were exhortations, admonishing the hearer to shun the *daevas* and to worship Ahura Mazda. In Old Avestan *mazda* means wise, and Ahura Madza is therefore “Wise Ahura” (an *ahura* was a god, but of a class separate from the rest of the *daevas*). While the old *devas* continued to be honored in India, even though overshadowed by newer gods, among Iranians Zarathushtra appears to have done his best to abolish the cult of the *daevas*. It may be that Zarathushtra condemned the use of *haoma*, but such condemnation is poorly attested.¹²

Zarathushtra’s religious outlook was strongly dualistic. He believed that supernatural powers, some good and some evil, are arrayed against each other and that a person must choose which of these two groups of deities he or she will worship. The prophet states this succinctly in Yasna 30:

Now the two primal Spirits, who reveal themselves in vision as Twins, are the Better and the Bad, in thought and word and action. And between these two the wise ones chose aright, the foolish not so.¹³

The better spirit is of course Mazda, the Ahura. In the Younger Avesta the evil twin has been personalized as Angra Mainyu, or as Ahriman, who plays a role similar to that played by Satan in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The Gathas regularly express the dichotomy between good and evil in impersonal and abstract terms. The polar opposites are *asha* and *druj*. The word *asha* denotes righteousness, truth, and proper order. Its antithesis, *druj* (sometimes transliterated as *drug*), denotes wickedness, lies, and chaos.

In keeping with his dualism, Zarathushtra may have contributed something to the concept of punishment and reward in the Afterlife. Before his time, the Iranians - like the Aryans of India - seem to have supposed that on the third day after physical death a soul crosses the *chinvato peretu*, a term that is usually translated as “the Bridge of the Separator.” Some souls go down to the shadowy underworld, while other souls fly up to Heaven and to joy.¹⁴ Exploiting this belief, Zarathushtra made a veiled threat that at the Bridge of the Separator one’s fate is

determined by one's choices during life: if you foolishly followed *druj*, you should expect the worst.¹⁵ Zarathushtra is also credited with introducing the notions of a physical resurrection and Judgement Day, but the evidence is unclear.¹⁶ The Afterlife is not a prominent theme in the Gathas. It is true that the English word, "Paradise," comes (via Greek) from the ancient Persian word *pairidaēza*, but the word occurs only once in the Avesta, and there it refers to a sacred, walled enclosure here on earth.¹⁷

One of Zarathushtra's most urgent projects was to stop the sacrificial slaughter of cattle. In Iran, as elsewhere, the slaughter of a cow or an ox would have been a community event: a sacrifice to a civic god, and a distribution of meat to all of the worshipers. Although the ritual was central to social and economic life as well as to religion, it had its critics. Indians may have objected to animal sacrifice because of their belief in transmigration, but in Iran only glimmerings of such a belief are attested. More important for Zarathushtra and his followers may have been the natural attachment that people had to their cattle because of the "secondary products" for which the animals were valued. Cows were a daily source of milk, butter and *ghee*, while castrated oxen served as draft animals, pulling plows and wagons.¹⁸ In ancient Near Eastern, Greek and Roman society a taboo on the eating of horsemeat was probably due to the perception of the horse as a "helper," and it may be that for similar reasons the slaughter of cattle came to be frowned upon and was finally forbidden in both Iran and India. Yet this was for Zarathushtra a matter of religious conviction, and not of sentimentality. In his time cattle were obviously still being sacrificed to the *daevas*, and he denounced the practice as a great evil. All of Yasna 29 is a prayer to Mazda, who has appointed Zarathushtra to be the protector of the ox against the violence of those who follow the Lie.¹⁹ Unlike the cults of the *daevas*, the cults of the *ahuras* evidently did not require the sacrifice of cattle or other animals, and these were therefore the deities that Zarathushtra worshiped.

Like the old Aryan gods, Ahura Mazda was anthropomorphic and anthropopathic, although - as a god of heaven - he was appropriately winged. Again like the other Aryan gods, Ahura Mazda was not an image god. The Persian kings did not hesitate, however, to portray him symbolically in their sculpted reliefs. In these reliefs, as for example on Darius' tomb at Naqsh-e Rostam, the royal sculptors represented Ahura Mazda "as a person rising from a winged disk alongside a lunar crescent."²⁰ Mazda was far and away the most important god for Zarathushtra, but the prophet proclaimed at least two other Ahuras: Vohu Manah and Asha. In his poetry Zarathushtra tended toward abstractions. At Yasna 47.1 he mentions six abstractions in connection with Ahura Mazda, and in the Younger Avesta the six were - along with Mazda himself - enshrined as the seven Amesha Spentas ("immortal powers").²¹ Among these abstract powers were Vohu Manah (Good Thought, or Good Purpose), Kshathra (Dominion), and above all Asha. Because the Gathas regularly invoke Vohu Manah and Asha alongside Ahura Mazda, we cannot describe Zarathushtra as a monotheist. All these abstractions, however, could be understood as attributes of (or as emanations from) a single god, and that is how they were interpreted in the classical and monotheistic Mazdaism of the third century CE.

Zarathushtra's admonitions, we learn from his Gathas, angered many people of his own community. Evidently, however, somewhere in Iran they were taken to heart by a ruler named Vishtaspa, who in his kingdom protected and probably even established the reformed religion of

Zarathushtra. This small bit of “historical” information comes from one of the Yashts, composed in Younger Avestan long after the time of Zarathushtra:

99. We worship the Fravashi of the holy king Vistaspa; the gallant one, who was the incarnate Word, the mighty-speared, and lordly one; who, driving the Druj before him, sought wide room for the holy religion; who, driving the Druj before him, made wide room for the holy religion, who made himself the arm and support of this law of Ahura, of this law of Zarathushtra.

100. Who took her, standing bound, from the hands of the Hunus, and established her to sit in the middle [of the world], high ruling, never falling back, holy, nourished with plenty of cattle and pastures, blessed with plenty of cattle and pastures.²²

Whether King Vishtaspa was a contemporary of Zarathushtra or belonged to a later generation is not indicated by the Yasht. We may assume that Vishtaspa’s conversion - whenever it took place - resulted in the closing down of some cults that were devoted to the so-called *daevas* and featured the sacrifice of oxen. The name Vishtaspa became, not surprisingly, very honored in the Mazdian tradition. It is tempting to speculate that the dynasty to which Vishtaspa belonged may have been the Achaemenid family, and that the kingdom over which he ruled may have been Parshua (Persia, or Fars, as it was called in Arabic), along the Persian Gulf. If so, Mazdaism would have been something of an established religion among the Persians well before the sixth century BC.

Mazdaism was not, however, enforced. In Parshua, as everywhere else in Iran, people seem to have been free to worship the old gods, although the old gods seldom had royal support. The Mazdian cult was sufficiently established that the Gathas of Zarathushtra were memorized and handed down orally for well over a thousand years. Together with other Yasnas they were presumably sung or chanted at various rituals, despite the fact that the Old Avestan language was hardly understood by the worshipers at those rituals. With the support of the Sassanid kings they were finally written down, along with the rest of the Avesta, in the fifth or sixth century CE.

Babylonian astrology, and the celestial gods

Some of the more important of the new gods in the *Achsenzeit* were celestial. The sun and moon had been regarded as divine all along, but in the seventh and sixth centuries BC they began to take on a new importance. The only one of the old Vedic gods who remained prominent in later centuries was Mitra, who in parts of India and in Iran became something of a sun-god. The Iranian Ahura Mazda may have also had solar connections. In addition to the sun and the moon, the five planets visible without a telescope - Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn - were seen as gods, and increasingly as important gods. These “wandering stars” played the key roles in astrology, a pseudo-science that began at Babylon ca. 750 BC and was more or less refined by the end of the fourth century BC.²³ Together the sun, moon and five planets became the seven celestial gods from whom our week derives: the day of the sun, of the moon, of Mars (Tiu for Germanic speakers), of Mercury (Woden), of Jupiter (Thor), of Venus (Freya) and of Saturn.

In the seventh and sixth centuries BC the celestial gods were concerned mostly with

communities or kings. By the end of the fourth century BC, however, Babylonian scholars had created horoscopic astrology, and with this “science” the stars’ concern was broadened from the ruler to the average individual: astrologers declared that every person’s destiny was determined by the stars under which he or she was born. In the third century BC astrology began to attract a following in Egypt and in the Mediterranean world, and by the second century CE it was taken very seriously by most people in the Roman empire, from illiterate peasants to emperors and philosophers.

Metaphorically, some of the image gods were themselves relocated to heaven. Worshipers who found it difficult to believe that the image itself was a god could console themselves with the knowledge that the *real* Marduk or Zeus or Re was in heaven, and that the statue in the temple was only a symbol of the god. In the long run, however, such rationalization could not salvage the iconic cults. When worshipers on glimpsing an image could no longer feel themselves transported to the very presence of divinity, the image became redundant, along with the temple in which it was housed.

Greece: the secular world

Unlike ancient India and Iran, Greece did not produce any of the great religions. But what the ancient Hellenes contributed to the *Achsenzeit*, and to the history of religion, was immeasurably important. From the east the Hellenes borrowed the notion of an immortal soul, and centuries later their speculations about the soul were appropriated by Jewish, Christian and Muslim theologians. Monotheism is a combination of the Judaeans’ monolatry - their worship of a single personal god - and the Greek philosophers’ speculation that a single impersonal divinity is the source of all physical reality. Most important of all, it was in ancient Greece that secularism began: an attempt to understand the world without reference to supernatural powers.

Secularism, first of all, was dawning in the Greek world as early as the eighth century BC. In his epic poems Homer of course gave plenty of room to the Olympian gods, but the poet was much more interested in the human story than in the doings of Zeus and the other gods. A century later, Archilochus and Sappho gave nods to the gods but focused their attention on their own love affairs, their quarrels, and their reputations. When Solon, perhaps in the 570s BC, explained to the Athenians why the poor were losing their farms and thinking of revolution, he told them explicitly: “Don’t blame the gods for this.... It’s your own fault.” With his leadership the Athenians enacted reforms and new laws to solve some of their problems.

Paradoxically, it was the disasters that the Hellenes had suffered that allowed them to escape from the superstitions under which many of their eastern neighbors continued to labor. During the Late Bronze Age (ca. 1700-1200 BC) Greek speakers were as religious as everyone else, and the palaces in Mycenaean Greece were meticulous in caring for more than a hundred gods, offering both animal and human sacrifice in order to maintain the welfare of the palace-states. In the disasters ca. 1200 BC, which brought the Bronze Age to an end, the religious establishment of Mycenaean Greece was virtually wiped out. The palaces at Mycenae, Pylos, Troy, Knossos and other centers were destroyed by raiders, and most of the sites were abandoned. Along with the palaces went government, maritime trade, literacy, the priests,

the cults, and the images of the gods. What survived into the Dark Age were the names and festivals of a few of the gods, especially those at home on Mt. Olympos, and a memory of better days. The Hellenes forgot how to cut stone and make roof tiles, and remained ignorant of those skills for four hundred years. To shape a cult statue or build a temple was far beyond their abilities or ambitions. Occasional hymns or bits of liturgy survived through the centuries in illiterate Greece, passed down orally from one generation to another. But nowhere in Greece were there professional memorizers of sacred texts, such as were to be found in the equally illiterate societies of India and Iran. And certainly the Hellenes had nothing like the literate and learned priests who on papyrus scrolls and clay tablets maintained the “stream of tradition” in Near Eastern and Egyptian temples. The god-lore that survived among the Hellenes were the myths (which is to say, amusing stories), especially those that detailed the sexual liaisons of Olympian gods with beautiful women and boys.

In the eighth century BC elements of civilization begin to return to the Aegean. Among these were cult statues and temples, awkward appendages to the traditional religion. Through the Dark Age the Greek deities had been aniconic, the average worshiper imagining the gods on Olympos or some other very high mountain. When the Hellenes resumed contact with the Near East they learned that a proper god lived in a temple and was made physically present in a magnificent statue. The Hellenes tried their best, and in the seventh century managed to build their first stone temples. By the fifth century BC Greek architects were supervising the erection of superb temples - the Parthenon in Athens, or the temple of Poseidon at Sounion - and Pheidias, Myron and Polykleitos were creating their famous statues in marble and bronze, but these triumphs came after a long period of experiment and improvement. What would have been the emotional experience of worshipers in the middle of the seventh century BC, as they stood near an altar while the temple doors were opened to reveal the homely cult statue inside? Some pleasure, perhaps, and anticipation of eating the sacrificial meat, but hardly exhilaration or religious transport.

Because of their long Dark Age, the religious tradition of the historical Hellenes was impoverished. The great temples in Egypt, Jerusalem, Anatolia and Mesopotamia were staffed by custodians, musicians and priests, who offered sacrifices to the resident gods every day of the year. In contrast, an Archaic Greek temple typically had a single priest or priestess (whose duties were nominal and largely honorific). On festival days the temple’s doors were opened, and at the altar in front of the temple the priest or priestess would preside over the sacrifice of an animal. But on most days of the year the cult statue stood alone in a dark temple. While the Olympians were brought down to earth by their physical representation in cult images, they were also tarnished by their representation in poetry and myth. The myths were entertaining but not edifying. Writing the stories down, as Hesiod did in his *Theogony* and as mythographers did in prose, made the gods seem even less praise-worthy.

Near Easterners who had questions about the world - Why does it rain? What keeps the stars from falling to earth? How did the world begin? - could answer their questions by reference to a very impressive god, such as Marduk or Yahweh or Amon-Re. Hellenes, in contrast, had difficulty crediting very much to Dionysos, Athena, Zeus, or to all of the Olympians together. Philosophy began at Miletus and other Greek cities on the Anatolian coast in the sixth

century BC. It served to answer questions for which Greek religion was incapable of supplying satisfactory answers. The first philosophers - Thales, Anaximander and their successors - were interested in the physical world, and were called *physikoi* ("physicists"). They were philosophers, however, and not scientists. They did not conduct experiments, and their speculation depended on logic and superficial observation.

Several Presocratic philosophers were outspokenly critical of the Hellenes' religious traditions. This was apparently the first time that people anywhere ventured a critical evaluation of their own religion. It was one thing to ridicule other people's beliefs and practices (the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal, for example, declared that the gods of the Elamites were not gods at all, and the Hebrew prophets regularly made sport of their neighbors' gods), but to examine one's own religious tradition and find it ridiculous was unprecedented. The Presocratics were not religious reformers, denouncing one cult in favor of another, or declaring themselves the recipients of a new divine revelation. Instead, they took a critical look at the entire Greek religious tradition. Ca. 500 BC Hekataios of Miletus observed that the myths of the Hellenes were many and laughable. At the same time, Herakleitos of Ephesos was baffled that his fellow citizens could regard statues as gods and could "pray to these statues, as if one were to have a conversation with houses."²⁴ Even more insistent in his criticism of the Olympians was Xenophanes of Kolophon. Late in the sixth century BC he wrote a long poem which is no longer extant, but which was frequently quoted by Christian writers of the second and third centuries because it furnished them with exactly the ammunition that they needed in their attack upon the gods of the Hellenes. Xenophanes contended that the Olympians and all the other anthropomorphic deities worshiped by the Hellenes and their neighbors were nothing more than human creations, and not very good creations at that: even before they were carved from wood or cast in bronze the Olympian gods were flawed, because Homer and Hesiod had described them that way.

If the Olympian gods were not credible enough to serve as explanations for natural phenomena, neither could a Hellene believe that they controlled the course of human events. In the fifth century BC the first Greek historians did for the world of human affairs what Greek philosophers had already tried to do for the natural world: Herodotos and especially Thucydides showed that history was understandable with little or no reference to the will of the gods. Historians and philosophers (or *physikoi*) thus attempted to do for the Hellenes what religion did in the older civilization of Egypt and the Near East.

Pythagoras and the soul

Although secularism is the modern world's most important legacy from ancient Greece, there are other legacies, some of them problematic. One of these is "the soul." In the third quarter of the sixth century BC the soul began its long career in Greek philosophy, launched by the teachings of Pythagoras. Pythagoras, whose name meant "Spokesman of the Pythian (Apollo)," was as much a prophet as a philosopher. Exactly what he believed and taught is much debated, because he seems to have written nothing. Unlike the Presocratic *physikoi*, however, Pythagoras was the leader of a sect, or a community, and the community tried to preserve his doctrines through the generations. His followers called themselves "Pythagoreans"

and were known to Plato and Aristotle for their distinctive way of life.²⁵ In the first and second century, five hundred years after his death, interest in Pythagoras and his teachings revived. Small groups of believers (whom historians call “Neopythagoreans”) celebrated their supposed founder. Several writers published biographies of the Master, and others composed works which they falsely credited to him. By ca. 300 CE, when Porphyry wrote his *Life of Pythagoras*, all sorts of things were believed about the prophet: that he had calmed storms and seas with a word, that he had correctly predicted earthquakes, that after he reprimanded the savage Daunian bear for killing domestic animals the bear forever after ate only fruits and vegetables, and much else.

What is quite certain is that Pythagoras was born on the Aegean island of Samos, and that at some point while Polykrates was tyrant of Samos (ca. 538-522 BC) Pythagoras left his native city and settled in Kroton, a Greek polis on the coast of the Italian heel. There he was for a while much esteemed and he established a small religious community. Eventually, however, his house was burned down, some of his followers were killed, and he was run out of Kroton. He lived out his days in Metapontion, another Greek city on the south Italian coast. By the end of his long life small cells of “Pythagoreans” were found in several cities in southern Italy and Sicily.

Pythagoras attracted a religious following because of his novel doctrines about “the soul.” The prophet seems to have given to the word *psychē* a new meaning. For Homer a *psychē* was a ghost or a wraith of a person who had died. For Pythagoras a *psychē* was something that you had already in this life, that survived after you died, and that is conventionally translated into English as “soul.” In life, said Pythagoras, the *psychē* is entombed or imprisoned in the body, and at death it is released. Then the soul either enters into eternal bliss or - as is the case for most people, who have not lived a life of Pythagorean purity - it begins a series of transmigrations during which it is progressively purified. It is possible but uncertain that the bliss that Pythagoras promised for his followers was synonymous - as it was in India - with the annihilation of the self.²⁶ “Transmigration of the soul” was expressed in Greek with the single word, *metempsychosis*, and belief in *metempsychosis* was one of the most important superstitions that Plato acquired from the Pythagoreans.

Like Zarathushtra, the Buddha, and other Indian sages in the *Achsenzeit*, Pythagoras may have been opposed to animal sacrifice. More generally, he may have instructed his followers to eat no meat. Again, what the historical Pythagoras said and did, and what the Neopythagoreans claimed that he had said and done, are two different matters. What is beyond dispute is that the Pythagorean tradition claimed that the founder eschewed animal sacrifices.²⁷ Pythagorean vegetarianism reflected the belief in transmigration of souls. Because animal sacrifice was the central act of worship in a civic cult of a Greek city, any doctrine condemning the sacrifice would have been incompatible with civic harmony and celebration.

An unusual feature of the Pythagorean community was its inclusion of women. Also eccentric was the communal character of the Pythagorean way of life. The tight cohesion of the group diminished the importance of the family and of property, and that too made Pythagoreans unpopular in many cities. The late resurgence called Neopythagoreanism happened mostly in

very large cities, such as Rome and Alexandria, where there was plenty of room for religious subcultures.

The importance of Pythagoras lies not in Pythagoreanism itself but in the influence that Pythagoras' doctrines had on Plato, and through Plato on the entire course of Greek philosophy. When Plato began writing many educated Hellenes already assumed the existence of an immortal soul, just as Pythagoras had taught, and supposed that its fate in the Afterlife was somehow dependent on what the person had done in his or her lifetime. Plato attributed so little to Pythagoras, and so much to Sokrates, that Pythagoras' role in Greek religious and intellectual history tends to be underestimated.

The sophists and fluent literacy

Ca. 450 BC a new breed of intellectuals - the sophists - appeared in Athens and a few other Greek cities. The sophists claimed (perhaps correctly) to be able to teach rich young men how to succeed personally and politically, and a few sophists became very rich and famous. The sophists' profession was made possible by a very important development in Greek society: the emergence of prose and of fluent literacy. A narrow elite, that is, was now able to read books, and prose writers were able to communicate with these readers at a more abstract level than had been possible before. Until the early fifth century BC Greek society had been based on oral (and usually poetic) communication, and the ability to read a book was restricted to a very few professionals. In Periklean Athens, however, the reading of books became not only pleasurable but also profitable for the upper class. The leap of literacy can be seen in the histories written by Herodotos and Thucydides. Herodotos' work was meant to be read aloud in public, and to be understood and appreciated by everyone in the assembled crowd. Thucydides' history, contrarily, was meant to be purchased by a wealthy man and to be read - and pondered - in private.

Fluent literacy heralded a cognitive revolution. In earlier times, wisdom for the Hellenes came in the form of poetry, and of easily memorized proverbs or maxims. This was traditional wisdom, passed down orally from one generation to the next. The prose writer sacrificed much of the beauty and emotional power of language, but this was offset by a great gain in clarity of thought and expression. The reader, in turn, could read and re-read a difficult sentence as many times as was necessary to understand it. The reading public in Greek society was always a minority, and even a small minority (probably fewer than one man in ten, and one woman in twenty, was able to read fluently). But the existence of a reading public was of extraordinary importance in the intellectual history of Greece and of the Western world.

As a result of the reading revolution and the teachings of the sophists, upper-class Hellenes in the last decades of the fifth century BC became more outspokenly critical of the traditional gods. Contempt for traditional piety was openly expressed by some of the leading Athenians - Euripides, Alkibiades, Kritias, Thucydides - and some writers began speculating about the origins of the Greek gods. Kritias suggested that the entire pantheon may have been invented by the decent but weak masses, who needed some "bogey-men" to frighten the strong and ruthless aristocrats (like himself) into moral behavior. Among educated Hellenes a

consensus formed that divine justice - the gods' punishing of the wicked - was a fantasy. This skepticism encouraged the belief - or the hope - that in the Afterlife our immortal souls are finally either punished or rewarded for our behavior in this life.

The growing chasm that separated the skepticism of the sophists and their students from the traditional piety of the majority at Athens resulted in the proposal of a law, late in the 430s BC, making it a crime to deny the existence of the gods.²⁸ The most famous instance of the division between the ordinary Athenian and the intellectual elite was the trial and execution of Sokrates. In 399 BC Sokrates was charged with "corrupting the young men of Athens, and not believing in the gods in which the city believed." Found guilty by a jury of 501 citizens, Sokrates was forced to drink the hemlock.

Plato and the origins of Hell

As we have seen, belief in some kind of punishment after death had arisen in India and Iran by the seventh century BC, and by the sixth was being promoted in Greece by Pythagoras. The Indians and Pythagoras thought in terms of a soul - an *ātman* or *psychē* - that transmigrated from the wrongdoer to another person or animal, and so in the course of one or more subsequent lifetimes paid for the wrong that had been done the first time around. Pythagoras' doctrines were firmly held by the small community that he founded, and were also imbedded in "Orphic" teaching, chants and poems. Although in the fifth century BC a few eminent Hellenes - Pindar, for example - embraced the idea of an immortal soul, most educated Hellenes regarded it as superstition. In 405 BC Aristophanes' comedy, *The Frogs*, made sport of the belief that evildoers are punished in Hades. In the play, Dionysos and Xanthias journey to the Underworld and see the horrors suffered by the villains, and meet the happy mystics who sing and dance in flowery fields.²⁹

Plato used his great talents and industry to give intellectual respectability to the old Orphic and Pythagorean doctrines. In several dialogues Plato (428-347 BC) elaborated his description of the *psychē* (that people *have* souls seemed to him self-evident, and therefore in no need of demonstration) and argued for its pre-existence, its immortality, and the punishment or reward that awaits it after death. Plato spent less time discussing the rewards for the good souls than the punishment of the bad. At the end of the *Republic* (Bk 10, 614B-621) he told the story of Er the Pamphylian, who had been killed in battle, went to the Underworld, and then came back to life and revealed what he had seen and experienced in the Afterlife. The *psychai* of men and women, reported Er, suffered or enjoyed in the Afterlife what they merited: the dreadful tyrant Aridaios, for example, was dragged back and forth through thorns that tore his skin, and was then tossed into the bottomless pit of Tartaros.

Even more graphic is the great myth at the end of the *Phaedo*. There Plato sketched in detail the geography of Hades, to which the souls of the wicked go after death. At *Phaedo* 113-14 "Sokrates" describes Hades' four rivers - Ocean, Acheron, Pyriphlegethon, and Kokytos - and the great, bottomless pit of Tartaros into which plunge the souls of the worst men, never to emerge. The souls of great criminals - patricides and matricides, for example - who have remorse for their crimes are sent to Tartaros only for a while, and then are spewed out into the river

Pyriphlegethon (“Raging Fire”) where they burn until (or unless) they are forgiven by those whom they have wronged. The souls of the righteous, on the other hand, escape all this and live in perfect bliss.

Monotheism in Greece? The philosophers’ God

Polytheism was a necessary corollary of belief in the image gods. If Egyptians believed, for example, that the image of Set in the temple at Avaris was a god, they could hardly deny that the image of Amon in the temple at Karnak and the image of Neith in the temple at Sais were also gods. If you believed that any of these statues was a god, you pretty much had to believe that all of them were. Distinctions were inevitably made: Amon at Karnak was certainly a much greater god than Sobk in his temple at Crocodilopolis. But ancient polytheism was an expansive creed, and when a traveler from a distant land entered a city he had never seen before he would quickly make the acquaintance of gods whose names he had never heard. On seeing their precincts he might have concluded that these were not so impressive as the gods in his native land, but he would not have doubted that these too were gods. Thus did polytheism and the worship of images go hand in hand.

When the iconic cults began to lose their credibility, however, the result was not immediately and not necessarily monotheism. In the long run the populations of Europe, North Africa and the Middle East did embrace religions that were more or less monotheistic: Judaism, Islam, and even trinitarian Christianity, which offered what it described as One God with Three Persons. The Neoplatonists and all other philosophers in the fourth century CE were monotheists, as were Manichees, Gnostics, Zoroastrians and others. In the fourth century BC, in contrast, monotheism was hardly in evidence.

According to the *OED* the word “monotheism” is first attested in the English language in 1660. It came into general use in the eighteenth century, with the rise of unitarianism: “monotheism” was then a useful term for distinguishing the belief of unitarians from the trinitarianism of traditional Christians. None of the ancient languages had a term corresponding either to “polytheism” or to “monotheism.” Although classical Greek and Roman philosophers had no word for it, they often thought monotheistically, and by the third century CE most philosophers were de facto monotheists. It is important to remark, however, that for a very long time in Greco-Roman antiquity polytheistic concepts and language continued to be the norm.

Glimmerings of monotheism appeared in the Presocratic philosophers. Xenophanes (ca. 570-475 BC), whose long poem lampooned his fellow citizens’ worship of the Olympians, is sometimes regarded as a monotheist but that is going too far. Xenophanes did write “there is one god, greatest among gods and men, like to men neither in body nor in soul... Without toil he sets all into motion, by the thought of his mind.” The sentence was congenial for later monotheists, but Xenophanes’ language both here (“greatest among gods”) and in other fragments from his poem is generally polytheistic.³⁰ In the 430s and 420s BC the philosopher Anaxagoras may have been practically a monotheist. He ignored the gods and spoke only of Nous (“Mind”) as the power that ordered all things. This was regarded both by Anaxagoras’ contemporaries and by later philosophers as a novel and daring proposition. Yet it was not quite

monotheism. As Martin West has noted, “we might say that here at last is a clear case of a monotheistic system, except that it is difficult to justify treating Anaxagoras’ *Nous* as divine.”³¹ There is even less evidence that Sokrates, Anaxagoras’ younger contemporary, expressed himself in monotheistic terms.

What about Plato? In the second and third centuries CE, as Neoplatonism was emerging, Numenius, Ammonius Saccas, Origen and Plotinus transformed Plato into a consistent monotheist. The actual Plato, however, was more ambiguous. Like earlier philosophers, Plato did sometimes refer to “the god” - singular - but he more often spoke of “the gods.” The closest Plato came to monotheism was in his *Timaeus*, a short dialogue written after 360 BC and so one of his last dialogues. In an earlier work, the *Phaedo*, Plato has Sokrates commend Anaxagoras for speculating that the entire universe is under the control of Intelligence (*nous*), but then has Sokrates criticize Anaxagoras for leaving the argument unfinished. This is the subject addressed in the *Timaeus*. Here Plato makes Sokrates a minor interlocutor, and gives the main role to a sophist, Timaeus of Lokri.³² Timaeus makes an argument that the universe - the cosmos - is so majestic and intricate that it must have been created by a divine craftsman or Demiurge (the Greek word for “craftsman” is *demiourgos*). Because this divine craftsman of the *Timaeus* is more personal than the abstract *nous* posited by Anaxagoras we may identify him (or it) as an early foreshadowing of “the philosophers’ God.” It must immediately be added, however, that the Demiurge is not God, and that Plato’s *Timaeus* is not a monotheistic text. Monotheism is primarily a negative term: the monotheist insists that there is *only* one god, who may therefore be called “God,” and that all gods other than God are imaginary. Plato does not here or anywhere else make such an assertion. We must also note that his Demiurge is not a personal or anthropopathic deity: while the Olympian gods could be angered or pleased, and intervened regularly in human affairs, Plato’s Demiurge plays no role other than designing the cosmos.

Aristotle added considerably to the evolution of “the philosophers’ God.”³³ In his *Metaphysics* Aristotle at great length argued for the existence of an Unmoved Mover as the origin of all reality. Toward the end of Book Eleven of the *Metaphysics* Aristotle begins an argument (finished in Book Twelve) for the existence of a power whom he calls *ho theos*, which literally is translated as “the god” but could also mean “God” (in the Greek language, a definite article is regularly attached to both proper names and common nouns). According to Aristotle, the material world can not be explained unless one posits the prior existence of an Unmoved Mover. Aristotle concludes his argument succinctly:

We hold, then, that *ho theos* is a living being, eternal, most good; and therefore life and a continuous eternal existence belong to *ho theos*; for that is what *ho theos* is.³⁴

Aristotle’s emphasis upon a single, divine source of being may again remind us of the monotheistic religions, but Aristotle does not ask whether there is one god or many gods, and he does not argue against the existence of “the gods.” Aristotle’s *ho theos*, or Unmoved Mover, is no more accessible and no more in need of worship than is Plato’s Demiurge. The personal God of the scriptural religions is thoroughly involved with human affairs: he has issued elaborate instructions (especially in Judaism and Islam) for human conduct, hears the prayers of all his worshipers, and (especially in Christianity and Islam) will at the End of Time punish or reward

all of humankind. The philosophers' God is an abstraction, or a logical conclusion, having little in common with the personal God of the scriptural religions.

A point well made by Michael Frede is that the philosophers' God came from their ongoing attempt to reduce reality to its most essential ingredients: mind (or will) and matter.³⁵ The Presocratics reduced the material world sometimes to a single element - water (Thales), the *apeiron* (Anaximander), air (Anaximenes) - and sometimes to a basic building-block, such as Anaxagoras' *spermata*, or Democritus' atoms. Just as the philosophers reduced matter - the passive side of reality - to a singularity, so also they reduced the active side of reality to a single mind, or will. That single force was Anaxagoras' *nous* or Aristotle's Unmoved Mover.

As we shall see, the question - "One God or many gods?" - became urgent throughout the Roman empire in the third and fourth centuries CE. The question had first arisen in Hellenistic Judaism, from the collision of Judaism with both Greek polytheism and Greek philosophy. For Hellenistic Judaeans, however, a self-conscious belief in One God was able to coexist with Greco-Roman polytheism. Finally, the apologists and martyrs of New Covenant Christianity made the doctrine of monotheism confrontational with ancient polytheism. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition the evolution from monolatry (or henotheism) to dogmatic monotheism was a long and uneven process, which in the sixth century BC had barely begun. An essential ingredient in that evolution and in the ultimate victory of monotheism was "the philosophers' God," who had begun to emerge in the fifth and fourth centuries BC.

Tenacity of the old ideas and the old gods

The image cults, as remarked at the end of Chapter One, were remarkably durable, and the *Gotterdämmerung* or "twilight of the gods" that began in India and Iran in the eighth and seventh centuries BC lasted to the fifth, sixth and - in a few places - even to the seventh century CE. By the 390s CE, however, skepticism was widespread enough that in the Roman empire whole communities could agree that the cult-statues were not gods at all, but "idols" inhabited by demons. The image cults were then denounced as "idolatry," the demons neutralized by exorcism, and the images themselves were torn apart. Monotheists pried loose and collected the gold, silver and ivory, and then burned the wooden core of the "pagan idol." When finally even the Parthenon came under attack by Christians in Athens, the Neoplatonist philosopher Proclus (411-485) reported that Athena appeared to him in a dream, asking him to give her shelter because she had been evicted from the home in which she had lived for a millennium.

Like the old gods, the old ideas about the Afterlife persisted long after the *Achsenzeit*. Pythagoras, Zarathushtra, and even the Buddha and the *Mahāvīra* were controversial figures in their own time. Their great prestige was to come later, as the movements they had started evolved and grew. In Greece, doctrines about the immortality of the soul were for long looked upon as gross superstition, the stuff of the mumbo-jumbo poetry that devotees ascribed to such mythical figures as Orpheus and Musaios, or to Pythagoras himself. In the fourth century BC Plato gave the doctrines intellectual respectability, but even then they were mostly restricted to the educated elite. Within a century of Plato's death the Academy itself abandoned his doctrines about the soul and began its long skeptical phase, that of the "Middle Academy." From the first

century BC onward, however, the Academy and then the wider world of Greek philosophy interested itself again in the soul, and by the third century CE philosophers spoke of few things other than the soul and its destiny.

1. Jaspers developed his thesis of an *Achsenzeit* in his *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (1949), translated into English as *The Origin and Goal of History* and published in 1953. For several perspectives on “the Axial Age” see S. N. Eisenstadt, ed., *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986). Karen Armstrong has recently described the radical innovations of the period in her *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of our Religious Traditions*. See Armstrong 2006.

2. Erdosy 1995, pp. 10-11.

3. Basham 1967, p. 237.

4. Basham 1967, p. 296.

5. Basham 1967, p 250.

6. On the devotion of part of the meat to the god in Vedic sacrifices see Heesterman 1993, p. 12: “Thus, the Vedic sacrificer mutters the *tyāga* or ‘abandonment’ formula, ‘This for god so-and-so, not for me,’ when the small part destined for the deity is committed to the fire.”

7. Basham 1967, p. 35, says of the early Aryan period in India: “In any case it is quite clear that both oxen and cows were slaughtered for food.” By the third century BC the taboo against killing cattle was widespread. On this development see Basham 1967, p. 195: “The inviolability of the cow was of slow growth. Though there seems to have been some feeling against the killing of cows even in Vedic times, Aśoka did not forbid the slaughter of cattle, and oxen, at any rate, were killed for food even later. But the *Arthaśāstra* refers to the existence of herds of aged, diseased and sterile cattle, and it therefore appears that before the Christian era cattle were normally allowed to die a natural death, at least in some parts of the country.”

8. The emperor Ashoka (a generation after Alexander the Great, so born ca. 300 BC) was the first ruler in India to embrace Buddhism. He became a Buddhist, his inscriptions say, in the 18th year of his reign (so ca. 262 BC). Buddhist tradition claims that Ashoka’s conversion occurred in the 218th year after the Buddha’s death, which has therefore been dated ca. 480 BC. Because all traditions say that the Buddha died at the age of 80, his birth is conventionally dated ca. 560 BC. Recent suggestions tend to lower that date to ca. 500 BC or even later.

9. A. T. Olmstead, *History of Persia* (1948), p. 102, put Zarathushtra in the 6th century BC, making him a contemporary of Vishtashpa and Hutuosa/Atossa, Darius’ father and mother. Richard Frye, *The Heritage of Persia* (1963), pp. 49-52, also leaned toward dating the prophet to

the 6th century BC. At the other extreme, Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (1979), p. 18, dated Zarathushtra to the period 1700-1500 BC. The primary evidence on Zarathushtra is dreadfully scarce and contradictory. Al-Biruni stated that Zarathushtra “lived” in the 258th year before Alexander the Great, so ca. 589 BC. Herodotus and Xenophon do not mention “Zoroaster,” but Pseudo-Xanthus, a Hellenistic historian, dated him 5000 years before the Trojan War. The language of the Gathas, quite similar to Vedic Sanskrit, suggests a date in the second millennium BC. The *-ushtra* suffix of the name “Zarathushtra” means “camels” (the meaning of *zarath* is unknown), and because domesticated camels were rare (although not unknown) before the end of the second millennium BC the prophet’s name fits better in the early first millennium than in the second (note also the camel given as a gift, at Yasna 44:18). As a *terminus ante quem* for Zarathushtra’s prophetic activity, I would suggest ca. 650 BC. Two gold tablets of uncertain provenance bear inscriptions in Old Persian that purport to have been written by Darius’ grandfather and great-grandfather, and both kings thank Ahura Mazda for their kingship. Although the inscriptions can hardly date from before the 5th century BC, they reflect what the historical Achaemenids thought about their distant ancestors’ religious beliefs. On these inscriptions see my *Early Riders*, pp. 136-37.

10. In the Avestan language *daeva* became a derogatory term, tantamount to “demon,” while *ahura* retained its high status and eventually became synonymous with “God.” In Indo-Aryan (especially Sanskrit) the words evolved in the opposite direction. Although in the Vedas the term *asura* was used for Varuna and several lesser gods, in Hinduism the word *asura* came to denote a demon, while *deva* continued to denote a god.

11. In the 16th century BC an Indo-Iranian family established itself as rulers of Mittani, which lay in the Jezirah of northern Mesopotamia. The family worshiped, among many others, five of the gods familiar from the Rig-veda. Indra, Mitra, Varuna and the Nasatya twins appear at the end of a list of more than a hundred gods in a vassal treaty that King Shattiwaza had to accept from Suppiluliuma, king of Hatti, in the 1340s BC. On the treaty see Kuhrt 1995, vol. I, pp. 296-7.

12. A phrase in Yasna 48.10 was translated into English by I. J. S. Taraporewala, from Christian Bartholomae’s 1905 German translation, as “the filthiness of this intoxicant.” That translation, however, has been challenged.

13. Yasna 30.3 (Bartholomae-Taraporewala trans.).

14. Boyce 1979, pp. 13-14.

15. For the “Bridge of the Separator” in the Gathas see Yasna 46.10-11 and 51.13.

16. Boyce 1979, p. 27: “Zoroaster was thus the first to teach the doctrines of an individual judgment, Heaven and Hell, the future resurrection of the body, the general Last Judgment, and life everlasting for the reunited soul and body. These doctrines were to become familiar articles of faith to much of mankind, through borrowings by Judaism, Christianity and Islam; yet it is in Zoroastrianism itself that they have their highest logical coherence.” Most of this “Zoroastrian”

eschatology comes from medieval Pahlavi commentaries, and is only vaguely suggested in the Gathas.

17. Choksy 2003, pp. 36-37, with note 66.

18. Cattle were originally domesticated for their meat, and for two or three thousand years were kept only for their meat, most of them being slaughtered shortly after reaching maturity. By the fourth millennium BC, however, their “secondary products” - to use the term coined by the late Andrew Sherratt - were highly valued, and cows and draft oxen began to live long and “productive” lives. On the secondary products revolution see Sherratt, “Plough and Pastoralism: Aspects of the Secondary Products Revolution,” pp. 261-305 in Ian Hodder *et al.*, eds., *Pattern of the Past: Studies in Honour of David Clarke* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

19. In addition to Yasna 29 see Yasna 32.8: “Among these sinners, we know, Yima was included, Vivanghen's son, who desiring to satisfy men gave our people flesh of the ox to eat. From these shall I be separated by Thee, O Mazda, at last” (Bartholomae-Taraporewala trans.). At 32.12 Zarathushtra denounces those “who destroy the life of the Ox with shouts of joy.” See also 32.14 and 44.20.

20. Briant 2002, p. 211.

21. On the meaning of *spentas* see Boyce 1979, p. 22.

22. Yasht 13, stanzas 99-100 (James Darmesteter's 1898 translation). The *fravashi* was something like the *genius*, or life-force, of the early Latins.

23. On all this see Rochberg 2004.

24. For citations from Herakleitos and Xenophanes see David Rice and John Stambaugh, *Sources for the Study of Greek Religion* (1979), pp. 31 ff.

25. At *Republic* 10.600a-b, Sokrates observes that Pythagoras set down the way of life that “still today” is maintained by Pythagoreans.

26. In discussing the Pythagorean doctrine of transmigration, W. K. C. Guthrie stated that “there can be little doubt that the ultimate aim was the annihilation of the self in reunion with the divine” (*The Greek Philosophers from Thales to Aristotle* [1950], p. 36), but the ancient evidence says nothing about this. So far as contact with India is concerned, late stories made Pythagoras a world-traveler, sending him to Egypt, to the Chaldaeans of Babylonia, and to the Magi of Persia, but the stories are apocryphal. For possible eastern influences on Pythagoras and the Presocratic philosophers see West 1971.

27. Bradbury 1995, pp. 334-335, with notes.

28. On the *psephisma* brought to the assembly by Diopeithes see Plutarch, *Perikles* 32.

-
29. Bernstein 1993, pp. 46-49, provides a good summary of Aristophanes' picture of Hades.
30. For an analysis of the Presocratic philosophers' tendency (vague, at best) toward monotheism see West 1999, pp. 29-36.
31. West 1999, p. 36.
32. Whether Timaeus of Lokri was an historical sophist or whether he was invented by Plato for the purpose of this dialogue is not known.
33. Frede 1999, pp. 46-50, has an excellent analysis of the extent and limitations of Aristotle's putative montheism.
34. *Metaphysics* 12. 1072b, lines 25-31. The translation (but not the transliteration) is by Hugh Tredennick, in the Loeb edition. Tredennick translates as "God" what I have transliterated here as *ho theos*.
35. Frede 1999, pp. 46-48.