

RICHARD HOLLOWAY

A LITTLE
HISTORY



RELIGION

'There can be no better place to learn more about religion than in the pages of
this enlightening book.' Peter Stanford, *Observer*





The Wanderer

Ur. It's a short two-letter word. The 'u' is pronounced as in 'up'. The 'r' is rolled the way a Scot would pronounce it. So it is Ur – or Urrrr. And it is where one of the most important figures in the history of religion was born some time around 1800 BCE – the patriarch Abraham. Abraham is claimed by Jews, Christians and Muslims as their founding father. Think of a tiny stream trickling out of a distant mountain that becomes three mighty rivers thousands of miles away on a vast plain, and you'll get the idea. Ur was in the south-east of Mesopotamia, a Greek name that means 'between two rivers', the rivers being the Tigris and the Euphrates. Ur was in the country we now call Iraq.

According to the story that has come down to us, Abraham was the son of Terah. He had two brothers, Nahor and Haran. In the Bible we find their story in the book of Genesis. But an old teaching guide to the Hebrew Bible has more stories about them. It tells us they were shepherds, pasturing sheep in the lush meadows of the Euphrates valley. And Terah had a profitable sideline making statues or idols of the gods worshipped by the people of the region.

The Mesopotamians had four top gods. Anu was the god of heaven, Ki the goddess of the earth, Enlil god of the air and Eki god of water. The sun and the moon were also worshipped as gods. It's worth noting how in ancient religion the forces of nature were almost automatically thought of as divine.

Like the people of India, the inhabitants of Mesopotamia wanted something to look at when they made their devotions to the gods, and Terah was happy to oblige them from his idol workshop. One day when he was absent and Abraham was in charge of the business an old man came in to buy an idol. 'How old are you?' asked Abraham. 'Seventy', said the old man. 'Then you're an idiot', Abraham replied. 'You were born seven decades ago, yet you're going to worship an idol that was made in the workshop at the back of this shop only yesterday!' The old man pondered a moment, declined the purchase, took back his money and left the shop.

His brothers were furious when they heard what had happened. They warned their father that Abraham was endangering the family business with his strong opinions. So Terah banned Abraham from the front of the shop and ordered him instead to perform the role of receiving the offerings brought by customers to their favourite gods in the room where they were on display. One day a woman arrived with a gift of food for one of the gods. Instead of proffering it to the idol in the customary way, Abraham mocked her. 'It has a mouth all right', he said, 'but it can neither eat the meal you prepared for it nor say thank you afterwards. It has hands, but they can't pick up a single morsel of the food you've laid before it. And though it has beautifully carved feet, it couldn't take a single step towards you. As far as I am concerned, those who made it and those who worship it are as stupid and useless as the thing itself.'

This was dangerous talk for two reasons. Challenging the settled religion of a community is never a popular thing to do. But it's made worse if the criticism also threatens the local economy. This was a society that worshipped many gods, and the manufacture of images of those same gods was a profitable industry. Abraham had landed himself in trouble. The safest thing to do was to leave. From this moment he became a wanderer who trekked great distances



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Abraham's story marks the beginning of the shift from polytheism to monotheism, from the relaxed worship of many gods to strict adherence to one. What prompted it? Why was Abraham so angry at those harmless little statues in his father's shop? We have to use our imagination to get into Abraham's mind, but it's easy to figure out part of what was going on there. He'd watched his father carve these little images. He knew what went into their making. So how could he possibly rate them as anything other than human toys? But why didn't he just shrug his shoulders at how gullible people were and move on? Why did he get so angry?

It was because he was a prophet who heard the voice of God speaking to him in his head. And the voice warned him that worshipping these gods was not just a game that kept people entertained and idol makers in business. It was based on a terrible and dangerous lie. There was only one God! And he did not just disdain the idols and images of the gods; he hated them, because they prevented his children from coming to know their own father. Like a parent whose children had been stolen by strangers, he wanted them back and those who had kidnapped them punished.

This is an important turning point in the human story and it's worth another moment's thought. It is obvious from our history that humans are good at hating each other. And it is usually those who differ from us in some way who become the objects of our hatred. Race, class, colour, sex, politics, even hair colour can prompt ugly behaviour in us. So can religion. In fact, religious hatred is probably the deadliest form of this human disease, because it gives human dislike divine justification. It is one thing to hate people because you don't like their opinions. It is another thing to say God hates them too and wants them exterminated. So it is worth noticing how intense religious conviction can add a dangerous element to human relationships – as another incident from Abraham's story will remind us.

As well as telling him to hate idols, the voice in Abraham's head ordered him to leave his father's country and migrate to another

land where in time he was to become a great nation. So Genesis tells us that Abraham set out with his family, his flocks and herds, and travelled west across the Euphrates till he came to the land of Canaan. Canaan, known today as Israel or Palestine, lay on the eastern edge of the Great Sea, which we now call the Mediterranean. Abraham settled not on the coast but inland along the limestone ridge that forms the spine of the country. And there his family with their flocks and herds prospered.

Then one day the voice in Abraham's head spoke to him again. It told him to take his son Isaac to a local mountain where he was to offer him as a sacrifice to God. Abraham was used to killing animals and burning them as gifts for God, but he had never before been commanded to kill one of his own children. But he dared not question the order. He rose early the next morning, roped a pile of firewood onto his ass, and set out with his son and two young men. When he reached the foot of the mountain he told the young men to stay behind and guard the ass. He tied the pile of firewood onto Isaac's back, lit a flaming torch, shoved a sharp knife in his belt, and the two of them set off up the mountain. As they trudged up the trail Isaac spoke to his father: 'You have fire and knife ready for the sacrifice, father, but where's the animal you're going to slaughter?' 'Don't worry, my son,' replied Abraham, 'God will provide what we need.'

When they reached the place on the mountain where the sacrifice was to be offered, Abraham arranged some stones into a makeshift altar and spread the firewood on top of it. Then he took hold of his trembling son and bound him to the firewood face down. He grabbed Isaac's long hair and yanked his head back to expose his throat. Then he pulled the knife from his belt and was about to slit his son's throat when the voice in his head called to him again.

'Abraham, do not slay your son,' it said. 'Your willingness to kill him at my command proves that your loyalty to me is stronger than your human affections. So I'll spare your son.' Shaking convulsively, Abraham lowered the knife. Then he caught sight of a ram whose horns were tangled in a bush. In a frenzy of relief he tore open its throat and offered it to God on the altar instead of his

son. We are never told what Isaac made of this terrifying scene on Mount Moriah, but it's not hard to imagine.

We know that human sacrifice was practised in some early religions. And it's not hard to understand how it started. If gods are thought of as unpredictable rulers who have to be kept onside, you can see how the primitive mind might conclude that as well as giving them the best animals an occasional human sacrifice might really win some favour. There may be a distant echo of that grim history in the Abraham and Isaac story. But that is not how it has been interpreted in traditional Judaism, Christianity and Islam, for all of which it is a key text. What it exemplifies for them is absolute subjection to the will of God above all earthly ties. While we would now judge as insane a man who claimed God told him to kill his son – even if he relented at the last minute – this does not mean we have to decide that all religion is madness. But it will be wise to place a question mark against some of its claims as we follow its stories through time. The danger we have noticed here is the tendency to give too much authority to the voice of God speaking in the human mind. Abraham's hatred of idols is a good guide here.

We followed his thinking in his dismissal of idols as human creations that it was absurd to treat as divine. But aren't our *ideas* about God also human inventions? We might not have crafted them with our hands out of bits of wood and stone, but we did form them in our minds out of words and ideas. That should make us cautious about the claims that are made for them. We have already seen how dangerous some of them can be. The idea that the gods may want us to sacrifice our children to them shows that religion can be an enemy of the human community. God's test of Abraham proves, if nothing else, that humans can persuade themselves to do almost anything if they think the order has come from 'on high'. And almost everything has been done in the name of religion at one time or another.

I said that the story of Abraham was a turning-point in the history of religion. It moved men and women away from polytheism to monotheism and to the idea of a single god. And it showed that religions were never static. They constantly evolved

and changed. Religion was a moving picture. That is why Abraham is such a compelling figure. He wandered and changed direction not only on the face of the earth but in his own mind. That ability to turn around and change direction is one of the marks of all interesting human beings. And it is one of the keys to the understanding of religion.

Abraham was a wanderer, and after his death, the people he founded continued to migrate as people have always done in their search for a better life. The story says that some generations after the death of Abraham a great famine hit the land of Canaan and it prompted his descendants to take to the road again. This time they went south across another great river into Egypt, where the next chapter in their history opened. And we'll reacquaint ourselves with Moses.

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