for whereas in all other species reproduction depends upon the susceptibility of the female, much more than the male, to a cycle of sexual readiness, in the human female alone such a cycle (as distinct from the reproductive cycle *per se*) no longer exists, and sexual activity is a constant possibility. The sin of the Tree of Knowledge thus begins with the woman, for it is she who reveals in her own makeup the possibility of emancipation from the cyclical, mechanical workings of instinct. Had man remained within the bonds of instinct, of urges built into his own biology, he might have remained in the Garden of Eden in a world of much beauty and contentment but also of limitation. Through the Tree of Knowledge, a new world came into being with the free play of desire. There emerged also freedom of choice. The sin of the Tree of Knowledge is both the first sin and the key to this new world. Only after many generations, after thousands of years, can the human race, in the fullness of its freedom, attempt to reconstruct for itself functional frameworks that might belatedly rectify the first sin, give it positive meaning, and thus annul it *qua* sin, turning it rather into a purpose and a task.

2

Abraham

THE RENOVATOR

Abraham is the hero of an epos that is peculiar to Israel and stands out with a greatness of its own in the history of mankind.

The Bible story tells us a great deal about the man and his ideas, the way he lived, his friends and enemies, his family, and so on. Having been told so much, the question may well be asked: What, after all, did he do? What makes him a central figure in the memory of the race? Key figures in history are not ordinary persons, and we usually attach some descriptive epithet to a great name: a noble conqueror, an artistic genius, an intrepid explorer, the founder of an empire, and so on. How can we define the greatness of Abraham?

Genesis 12:1-22:19.

The most accepted answer to this question—throughout the generations—has been the view that Abraham was the innovator of monotheism: that he gave us the faith in one God. He is alleged to have been the first to conceive and develop the idea, and thereby to have founded the Jewish people and all the monotheistic religions and, consequently, much of the philosophy and modes of thought that lie at the source of our civilization.

Nevertheless, despite the vivid *Midrash* of the young Abram smashing the idols, this view of the father of the nation as principally an iconoclast is not accepted by serious scholars. A rereading of the Bible text is enough to show that there is no mention of Abraham's role as a great prophet bringing to the world the belief in a single God. Many wonderful things are related about the man, and his stature holds up to any critical scrutiny. His deeds and character are in fact recollected with love and reverence in many tales, with descriptions of his faith and devotion, his wanderings, his courage, his hospitality, and even his weaknesses. But the fact that he was the originator of monotheism is not mentioned.

In point of fact, a closer examination of the Genesis story and of the many exegeses leads to a different view of the man and sheds light on many other developments in religious history. To begin with, according to the Bible itself, the belief in one God is not anything new, nor is it the peak

of some evolutionary development. Monotheism is not a higher stage of some process of growth following on a lower stage of polytheism. Monotheism is itself primary and basic; it has been the dominant mode of worship from as far back as human memory goes. All the other modes of religious faith came after it, and not before. For this truth, the scriptural text itself, though it does not say so in precisely this fashion, is the chief evidence. And like Maimonides and other Jewish sages, modern scholarship, especially in the field of anthropology, tends to question whether polytheism, even in its primitive forms such as fetishism or voodoo, is not a degeneration of primary monotheistic cults.

In other words, even the most primitive of peoples evince a faith in a higher power. It may be stretching the point to call this monotheism in the modern sense of the term, because the primitive mentality cannot make abstractions to the same degree. Nevertheless, a basic belief in one supreme basic power that makes everything happen in the universe is common to all—even to the bushmen of Africa or the inhabitants of the Tierra del Fuego in South America, peoples thoroughly isolated from other cultural influences. Their fundamental belief is not in many gods or even in various forces of nature that have to be propitiated; it is a belief in or worship of one power, one essence or thing that takes on the dimensions of the utmost

grandeur their psyche can conceive. This fundamental stance of the human before the holy, which is just within and yet beyond conception, is not necessarily a matter of man's relation to any specific force of nature, or to a person or awesome image, or even to gods and demons. It is the primary sensation of "little me," which is the true feeling of every human being when facing the mysterious beyond.

This is the genesis point in the soul. From it two different courses may be taken. One may hold fast to this primal unity against the impact of the inexplicable and bear up to all that such a position implies. This course would lead to a faith in a single God. The alternative development would be from the unity to the multiplicity. In other words, from simple monotheism—the direct faith in something not specific or clearly oriented (which is perhaps like the faith of a child)—to a complex faith, derived from the endeavor to isolate certain things and subjects. At first, there is the concept of the whole, because man cannot yet define any specific force or thing. Afterward, the whole begins to be analyzed, broken down into parts and categories: fire, water, air, earth, sun, and the like. Feelings of fear, gratitude, and shame lead to rites of worship of that eminent force of nature that seems to be most endowed with a life and consciousness of its own. In turn, it itself becomes a complex and variegated system of forces, each

with a character of its own and ultimately with a representative god of its own.

After further development and degeneration, the stage is reached of the image or figure. The graven image is not the father of the god but its offspring. At first, the image is the symbol of the Divine's power; but, after a certain decline of the power of faith, men no longer present themselves before the primal force or the symbol but relate to the physical image, the statue. Then follows the worship of these statues and pictures and of whatever else is given to visual perception, touch, caress.

Idolatry of this sort is, therefore, not the first or the most primitive stage of religion. It is a later development in a certain direction. It is a transition from the primal belief in an unknown God to a worship of tangible and comprehensible gods. The great amalgam of the infinite is very difficult to negotiate with. It is much easier to relate to some specific force or image and to propitiate "him" with offerings and to expect certain responses in the way of rewards and punishments.

Polytheism is thus a complicated and sophisticated system of worship springing from the need to establish a "rational" and direct contact with the Divine. Instead of trying to communicate with a basic supreme essence, polytheism believes in the possibility of usefulness of intermediaries, such as specific gods or a set of semidivine forces.

Even the Hindu scriptures (like those of most other "polytheistic" religions) recognize the existence of a supreme formless Divine, the Atman, who cannot be reached by man except through the functional gods–which increase in number the nearer they get to the popular mind. And, of course, this is the perspective of the Bible itself. The first man is seen as a whole, the archetype of a direct relation with a single hidden God. The following generations "began to call on the name of God" (Genesis 4:26), and this, according to a certain exegesis, indicated that men were beginning to attach significance to other forces–of nature, symbols, and images, whether genuine or false. A system of well-defined forces that provide a reasonable explanation for things is the product of an advanced culture, with a philosophy, science, astronomy, and so on.

This intellectual world of polytheistic religion–with all its sophistication and corruption–was the world in which the patriarch Abraham lived. He did not emerge from a pastoral world of wandering shepherds, uncouth and unlearned. He came from great cities, centers of culture and hubs of commerce. In these cities, there were banks and letters of credit, as in our own day, even if documents were written on bricks of clay. A world of elaborate civilization, already ancient and worldly-wise in its own way: Ur of the Chaldees, Babylon, Egypt. . . . It was a polytheistic, idolatrous urban-

ity, the height of an ancient culture, representing the most advanced ideas and the most refined concepts in science, art, and philosophy.

And in this world, the "modern" world of the ancient past, Abraham found himself believing in a single God. It was not a new discovery on his part; on the contrary, it was a reaffirmation of a very old truth, one that had almost been forgotten and was probably considered by his contemporaries as barbaric and primitive. Abraham was thus not an innovator but an ultraconservative, like someone belonging to a cult of ancient origin. On the other hand, Abraham did represent something very new: he was a prophet in that he called for a renewal of faith, a return (almost a repentance) to the divine Oneness. He tried to restore the faith of a distant past; but his contemporaries probably saw him as a crude and rather old-fashioned preacher.

One of the proofs offered by the Bible itself is the meeting with Melchizedek, King of Salem (Jerusalem), priest of the supreme God (Genesis 14:18-20). This passage implies that Abraham has companions in faith, that his religion is not his own private invention. These companions were to be found scattered in isolated spots throughout the world, such as this small city on the way from one great center of culture on the Euphrates to another on the Nile. What is more, all along the journey, Abraham called on the name of God; he

built altars and sanctuaries and taught people the nature of the divine unity. What he did amounted to a cultural revolution in his time: he tried to revive what was considered an archaic remnant of a primitive religion, and to make it into a new system of faith.

Hence, Abraham was not really an innovator or someone proclaiming an entirely new concept of religious belief. He was simply the first person in a long time to relate seriously to an old religious outlook that was primary and genuine. He was a great man in his own terms–a leader of a tribe, a successful man of the world, a conqueror in battle, a fulfilled man in private life, and a thinker who was not subdued by adverse public opinion. In other words, he was a great leader who fulfilled the same function as in later generations would be attributed to a messiah–the restoration of the ancient system of correct relations between man and the Divine.

Abraham endeavored to release the precious truth from the hands of a small body of the faithful and to build a new sort of vessel to preserve it and to live it–a tribe, a community and family structure that would become a special nation. And this national unit would be able to renew the old faith in one God and keep it alive by grouping together and living according to its spirit.

For this purpose, Abraham wandered the face of the earth, gathering to him all those people who

still believed and trying to awaken others to believe in the Divine Unity. He called on the name of God and preached to all to come to God. In short, Abraham was actually the first prophet to emerge from the ancient faith who taught it as something vital and true, as something to live by.