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## ***The God of Abraham***

**Jean-Marc Heimerdinger**

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Abraham marks the very beginning of Judaeo-Christianity. He stands as the beginning of faith, the first man to put his trust in the true God. The French philosopher Sartre somewhere asked the question: How does Abraham know that God is the true God? If the recent literature on the religion of the Fathers is to be believed, the inevitable answer to that question is that Abraham could never have known that the God who spoke to him was 'the true God'. Indeed, it is generally accepted, though not always with conviction, that Abraham worshipped El, the Canaanite God.<sup>1</sup> Some scholars, however, have pointed out that El, the God of Abraham, shared little of the complex personality of the Canaanite god El. Rudolf Kittel made this observation some time ago,<sup>2</sup> and following this, various proposals have been made by a number of scholars.<sup>3</sup>

The aim of this study is to present the idea that the way in which the true God showed his presence among the multitude of gods in the Ancient Near East was as the 'personal God' of Abraham. This was a familiar religious concept in the culture of the time, which, it will be suggested, God chose to use to reveal himself.

### **THE WORLD OF THE GODS**

In the Ancient Near East the gods were not a theoretical notion but a real power. People lived their lives constantly confronted with 'active forces' whose presence was impossible to ignore, for they constantly manifested themselves, either as helping or as opposing people. They were active in every area of life—in political affairs and physical well-being of the natural world. When these powers appeared to be stronger or more intelligent than man, they were referred to as 'gods'. In other words, a god was a being endowed with power and with knowledge, who intervened in man's life through a variety of phenomena. Such cosmic or life-giving powers which were met within the course of a man's life were as varied and as complex as life itself. These forces were not considered as a unified whole and so people were naturally inclined to be polytheists. A polytheist is aware of the presence of gods in various places but he does not group these experiences together to form a unity.

Even a brief survey of the gods of the Ancient Near East reveals that the principal gods were those who were directly concerned with the broad framework of the life of man. There are

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<sup>1</sup> See D. N. Freedman, 'Who is Like Thee Among the Gods? The Religion of Early Israel' in P. D. Miller, P. D. Hanson and S. D. McBride (eds.), *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honour of Frank Moore Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 315-35. Freedman describes the patriarchal religion in the following way: 'The essential feature is that the chief God is El (Shadday).... So far as evidence goes, patriarchal religion shared many features with the neighbouring Canaanites, including a consort for El (probably Asherah) and other divine beings' (333). This represents an opinion held by a number of scholars. But however attractive, it is not irrefutable. Freedman believes that there is proof in the divine titles and epithets of the poem of Jacob's blessings to show that it is essentially Canaanite in content. But in order for his conclusions to be a true description of the religion of the Patriarchs, an analysis of the patriarchal narratives would be necessary to see if evidence could be found there too.

<sup>2</sup> R. Kittel, *Die Religion des Volkes Israel* (Leipzig, 1929).

<sup>3</sup> William McKane, *Studies in the Patriarchal Narratives* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1979), 195-224 offers a good survey of the various theories. He notes: 'The question whether or not the patriarchs were worshippers of El or of Elim is one around which controversy still rages' (195).

those who rule over the world, exercising their power over the four cosmic realms: the heavens,

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the earth, the seas, and the underworld. There are the gods above, such as An, the god of heaven, chief god of the Mesopotamian pantheon. In Egypt, there is Re, the sun god, maintaining the rhythm of nature; the falcon, Horus, also a god of heaven, flies high in the sky, and is a protector of men but also a devourer of meat. Astral gods such as the moon, Venus and the other stars are often associated with the gods of heaven. The gods of the atmosphere are so close to the earth that they have a direct effect on life there and are viewed as gods of the earth. In Egypt there is Shu, the god of the air who represents empty space, beyond the perception of man but indispensable to his life. Enlil, the Mesopotamian 'Lord Wind' is the violent wind who is responsible for floods and other disasters. In the western Semitic pantheon there is Adad, god of storm who creates terror with his thunder and lightning, but also provides fructifying rains. The gods of freshwater rivers reside under the earth, half-way between the surface of the earth and the underworld, gods such as Ea in Sumer, who produces the thirst-quenching springs.<sup>4</sup> The fourth area of the world is the netherworld. This is where the great rulers of the realm of the dead, such as the Mesopotamian Nergal and Ereshkigal exercise their power.

In the space around the ground and within the ground itself all sorts of phenomena occur which suggest the presence of beings who are greater than mortal man. Man is subject to these powers, he has to avoid their anger, appease their rage or obtain their favours. In the wind, in the rain, in fire, and in the life which springs from the ground and continues in the seed, there is a force of will which man has either to capture or avoid. Nature is thus seen as inhabited by gods of vegetation, of the rivers, of the springs and of the mountains. Within the domain of agriculture, and especially with the introduction of the farming of animals, it is the powers of fertility, Hathor in Egypt, Baal and the Asherahs in Canaan, which take on greatest significance. The bull becomes the most widespread symbol of fertility. There is also the northwest Semitic god Dagan who rules over the harvests and the Egyptian Osiris, god of the corn and renewal.

A common characteristic of all these powers is that they never die. When Gilgamesh in search of everlasting life meets Siduri, the woman of the vine and the divine wine-oaker, she says to him: 'When the gods created mankind they appointed death for mankind but life they kept in their own hands.'<sup>5</sup> Baal, the nature god, disappears in the heat of the summer but reappears with the first autumn rains. Furthermore, all these deities are capricious and unpredictable. It is difficult for man to know how they will behave or what their wishes are. A god can suddenly become angry and fierce, like the Egyptian crocodile god or the Canaanite god of pestilence, Resheph. This is especially true of the national gods. In Mesopotamia, for example, each city or state chose as their patron, leader or king, one or other of the deities which they

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<sup>4</sup> The Mesopotamian Epic of Creation, *Enuma Elish*, tells us that in the beginning, Apsu, the freshwaters or the male element, and Tiamat, the salt waters or the female element, were mixed. The god Ea used his magic to overpower Apsu and to conquer the freshwaters.

<sup>5</sup> 'Gilgamesh, Old Babylonian Version,' *Myths from Mesopotamia*, translated by S. Dalley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 150.

represented by a statue. The statue of the god was set up in the temple and the god shared in the life of his people, fighting at their side and giving the king strength and wisdom to win wars.<sup>6</sup> But it was also possible that, for no obvious reason, a god could suddenly abandon the army and the king in the middle of a battle.<sup>7</sup> Another type of disaster occurred when the gods violently and without warning turned against their own town. In the *Lamentation over the Destruction of Sumer and Ur* the four leading deities of the Sumerian pantheon—An, Enlil, Enki and Ninhursag—have turned against Sumer. This is how the calamity is described:

An, Enlil, Enki and Ninhursag decreed its fate; the fate decreed by them cannot be changed, who can overturn it? ... Enki has deprived the Tigris and the Euphrates of water  
... Ningirsu has emptied out Sumer like milk ... On the land fell a calamity, one unknown to man.<sup>8</sup>

A further problem was that the personality of these gods was often unstable and their attributes variable. The world of the gods was not an organized world; on the contrary, their assembly was chaotic, agitated, with constant arguments. It was not unlike the world of men, with its never-ending quarrels and wars and other destructive passions.<sup>9</sup>

To this confusion of rival deities and powers, an attempt was made to bring some kind of organization and purpose and to extract, as it were, principles which were capable of providing the individual with guidance and protection from life's storms. The Egyptians recognized a principle of order, *Maat*, established at creation and manifested in nature and society.<sup>10</sup> *Maat*, 'truth' or 'right order', guards and protects the gods, the king and his subjects. The Pharaoh is also helped by Hu and Sia which represent commandment and discernment.<sup>11</sup>

## THE 'PERSONAL GOD' IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

Another escape from the confusion, which first arose in Sumer,<sup>12</sup> and which was to spread over the whole of the Semitic world, is the belief in a 'personal god'. In his description of Mesopotamian religion, Thorkild Jacobsen was the first to coin the term 'personal God' to describe a person's own and special god who stands in a very close relationship to him, and

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<sup>6</sup> See M. Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries B.C.E.* (SBLMS 19; Missoula: Scholars Press, 1974).

<sup>7</sup> B. Albrektson, *History and the Gods: An Essay on the Idea of Historical Events as Divine Manifestations in the Ancient Near East and in Israel* (CWK Gleerup: Lund, 1967) provides a good survey of evidence.

<sup>8</sup> Translated by S. N. Kramer, in J. B. Pritchard (ed.), *ANET* 3rd edn. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 611-619.

<sup>9</sup> A good illustration is found in the mythological texts of Ugarit describing the conflict between El and Baal and the role played by the goddess Asherah.

<sup>10</sup> 'The conception of Maat expresses the Egyptian belief that the universe is changeless and that all apparent opposites must, therefore, hold each other in equilibrium.' H. Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948), 64.

<sup>11</sup> In Mesopotamia, two other concepts are called upon, Kittu and Mesharu, 'truth' and 'justice'. This is the translation offered by Driver and Miles, *Babylonian Laws II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 13. See also L. Epsztain, *Social Justice in the Ancient Near East and the People of the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 1986), 4: 'In the two main Babylonian sanctuaries dedicated to this god (i.e. Shamash), at Sippar and at Larsa, the worshippers of the sun counted among the children of Shamash two personifications of justice, Kittu and Mêsharu (the two names derive from the Akkadian roots *kânu* and *esherû* which denote "be true" and "be just" respectively.'

<sup>12</sup> J. Klein, 'Personal God and Individual Prayer in Sumerian Religion,' *Afo Beiheft* 19 (1982), 295-306.

who ensures that his actions will succeed, indeed, that his whole life will be a success.<sup>13</sup> The closeness and intimacy of the relationship is portrayed through the imagery of parent and child. Jacobsen points out that the personal god was the central element of a personal religion, a religious attitude, which in his view originated in Mesopotamia in the beginning of the second millennium and subsequently influenced the whole Ancient Near East. He summarizes this religious attitude in this way: 'The individual matters to God, God cares about him personally and deeply.'<sup>14</sup> Building on Jacobsen's idea and

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taking it further, two German scholars, Hermann Vorländer<sup>15</sup> and Rainer Albertz,<sup>16</sup> have each contributed a thorough study on the subject of the personal god in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East. Henri Cazelles, in an important article, has also directed attention to the notion of the personal god in the patriarchal stories.<sup>17</sup>

Before embarking on a more detailed examination of the particular features of the personal god, it will be useful to have in front of us the definition provided by Vorländer which I shall use as a basis for my study:

Under the concept of 'personal god' is meant the function of a deity who stands in a close and continuing relationship to an individual and his family. 'Personal' will not be used here with the meaning of 'existing as a person'.<sup>18</sup> It will mean the 'belonging of an individual to a particular god'.<sup>19</sup>

Vorländer detects this religious phenomenon not only in Mesopotamia but also in Asia Minor and Arabia.

The role of the personal god, then, is to assist the individual who seeks help from him. The personal god (also referred to as 'man's god' or 'the protector god') is different from any other deities in that when mention is made of him, he is not envisaged as exercising physical or political or even psychological power, but rather as a companion who cares for a man and who is so close to him that he can call him 'my god', or 'my goddess'. Friends will refer to the personal god as 'your god' or 'his god'. In a few cases the name of the personal god is known, but it is rarely the name of one of the great gods of the Semitic pantheon. As a more general rule, the god is not given a name but rather is mentioned with reference to the name of the person whose life he protects. When a reference to a personal god is incorporated into the name of a person, it usually exists in the form of 'Ilu' or 'El' (in northwestern Semitic).

The first function of the personal god is to ensure the well-being of his charge. This is how a personal god is described in a letter: 'Your god, your guardian spirit who blesses you.'<sup>20</sup> He gives him strength each day, he keeps him in good health, blesses him materially, in particular

<sup>13</sup> T. L. Jacobsen, 'Mesopotamia' in H. Frankfort, J. A. Wilson, T. Jacobsen, W. Irwin (eds.), *The Intellectual Adventure of Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 123-219. Also in his *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New York: Yale University Press, 1976), 145-164.

<sup>14</sup> Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 147.

<sup>15</sup> H. Vorländer, *Mein Gott. Die Vorstellung vom persönlichen Gott im Alten Orient und im Alten Testament*. (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1975).

<sup>16</sup> R. Albertz, *Persönliche Frommigkeit und offizielle Religion* (Stuttgart: Calwer Verlag, 1978).

<sup>17</sup> H. Cazelles, 'Le Dieu d'Abraham,' *Les Quatres Fleuves*, 6 (1976), 5-17. Reprinted in H. Cazelles, *Autour de l'Exode* (Paris: Gabalda, 1987), 53-66.

<sup>18</sup> Vorländer uses the word 'Personhaft' here.

<sup>19</sup> Vorländer, *Mein Gott*, 3. Translation mine.

<sup>20</sup> F. R. Kraus, Briefe aus dem British Museum, *AbBI* (1964), quoted by Albertz, *Persönliche Frommigkeit*, 107.

procuring for him his daily quota of food: 'Without the personal god, man eats no bread.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps most important of all, the personal god ensures that the person in his care is blessed with descendants.<sup>22</sup> The personal god intercedes on behalf of his charge before the great gods and he can also act as an intermediary between these great gods and the person he has responsibility for.<sup>23</sup>

A free and simple dialogue takes place between the personal god and the individual. The god speaks and the person responds to him, sometimes in a lament as in the poem 'Man and His God':

My companion says not a true word to me, my friend gives lie to my righteous word. The man of deceit has conspired against me, and you, my god, do not thwart him.<sup>24</sup>

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A literary rendering of such dialogues would seem to occur in the epic of Gilgamesh. The goddess Ninsun ('Lady Wild Cow'), mother of Gilgamesh, speaks to her son and Gilgamesh confides his plans to her: 'Ninsun, I am adamant (I shall take) the distant path to where (Humbaba lives)... until the day where I finally reach the Pine Forest, until I slay ferocious Humbaba.'<sup>25</sup> The personal god can also disclose a person's future and reveal the good or the bad which lies ahead, or warn of certain risks and dangers.

In the Ancient Near East a great number of personal names testify to the idea that man owes his life to the gods. This is equally true of the protector god who is a 'father' to his charge. The name of Abram is evocative of this divine paternity (Ab = father) which is further made evident in the promise of descendants. The personal god of a man is also his procreator, his father, or his mother in the case of a goddess. This characteristic is apparent in the poem 'Man and His God' referred to above: 'My god, you are my father who begot me.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, in the poem of the Suffering Innocent, his friend says to the suffering man: 'Your god who begot you is yours.<sup>27</sup> A Sumerian proverb clearly reinforces this idea: 'As to a perverse child, his mother would have done better never to have given birth to him, his god should never have made him.<sup>28</sup> This representation of the personal god as the creator of man is also found in Egypt.<sup>29</sup>

Expressions such as 'the god is at his right' or 'the god is at his left' or 'he (the god) maintains his head upright for happiness' from which the phrase 'god at his head' is derived,<sup>30</sup> express the feelings of interest and the close relationship which exist between the individual and his personal god.

Although the personal god is friendly and benevolent, the close relationship is one which requires cultivation and not neglect. The god acts as a shield against the evil and frightening

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<sup>21</sup> S. N. Kramer, 'Man and His God,' *VTSup* 3 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1955), 159.

<sup>22</sup> Many examples are given in Vorländer, *Mein Gott*, 83, 124, 160.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 87-89.

<sup>24</sup> Kramer, 'Man and His God,' 174, lines 35-38, 178.

<sup>25</sup> 'Gilgamesh III,' *Myths from Mesopotamia*, translated by S. Dalley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 64.

<sup>26</sup> Kramer, 'Man and His God,' 175, line 96.

<sup>27</sup> J. Nougayrol, 'Une version ancienne du "juste souffrant",' *RB* 59 (1952), 246, lines 8 and 9.

<sup>28</sup> Vorländer, *Mein Gott*, 16. Translation mine.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 16, n 4.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 21, 122.

powers, but if he is angered he can 'leave the body' of his charge. At that point, demons can attack the man, torment him with sickness, headaches, or any other kind of persecution.<sup>31</sup>

The religious obligations of man towards the great gods involved obedience to numerous duties—moral, juridical, or ritual in nature. Thus, the laws of community and individual life were important as transmitting the will of the gods. There were duties and obligations of all orders, from social regulations to 'taboo' type injunctions.<sup>32</sup> The same kinds of obligations existed between a man and his personal god. For example, certain actions might be forbidden, especially with regard to the eating of food. If an individual did not accept the demands and warnings as binding but went against the will of his god, he exposed himself to being rejected and to the opening of the door to every kind of evil and disaster. Numerous texts of omens illustrate the signs which enabled a person to recognize if his personal god had gone away from

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him: for example, if a man forgets a dream he has had, or if his dog lies down on his bed.<sup>33</sup> Abandonment and rejection by the personal god brings anxiety and grief, as shown in this poem, 'To the Personal God':

In tears of grief, in the pain of death  
Like a dove he moans.  
He is full of sorrow, day and night,  
Towards his merciful god, like a wild cow he bellows.  
Endlessly he gives voice to his bitter misery,  
Before his god, in entreaty, he humbles himself.<sup>34</sup>

A person is safe, then, in the hands of the god as long as he has not grieved or offended him, as long as he prays to him and does not neglect his worship of him.

However, there is nothing mechanical or superstitious about this communion; on the contrary, it is a communion grounded in a kind of intelligence: 'If you think carefully things over, your god belongs to you. If you don't think carefully things over, your god is not yours.'<sup>35</sup> Here, the personal god is associated with a type of intelligence, a way of thinking. He is a power reflected in the mental attitude, combining planning, flair and watchful attention.<sup>36</sup>

## ABRAHAM AND HIS GOD

A reading of the Abraham narrative, even taking into account the various theological traditions which have left their traces in the text, leaves one with the striking impression that

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 91-95.

<sup>32</sup> See Jean Bottéro, 'Une grande liturgie exorcistique' in his *Mythes et Rites de Babylone* (Geneva: Slatkine, 1985), 163-219. This exhaustive study and thorough listing of the numerous daily prohibitions and taboos in Mesopotamia helps to recreate the true religious attitudes of this society.

<sup>33</sup> Vorländer, *Mein Gott*, 101.

<sup>34</sup> Marie-Joseph Seux, *Hymnes et Prières aux Dieux de Babylone et d'Assyrie* (Paris: Cerf, 1976) 143-145. Translation mine.

<sup>35</sup> W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960) 227, lines 23-26. I have modified Lambert's translation in the light of Cazelles, 'Le Dieu,' 58.

<sup>36</sup> This mental attitude emphasizing careful thinking is found among the sages of the Ancient Near East. In the wisdom texts, wisdom is described as the ability to reflect, to plan carefully, to maintain a watchful attention. D. Römhild, *Wege der Weisheit: Die Lehren Amenemopes und Proverbien 22:17-24:22* (BZAW 184; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989), 135-50, points to the notion of the 'personal god' in the Egyptian wisdom texts.

the God who revealed himself to Abraham was his personal God. He is remarkably unlike the great Canaanite gods of the area. Indeed, he shows different characteristics in the patriarchal stories of Genesis from the ones described later in the Pentateuch. He does not reveal himself with the attributes of the lord of nature or of the natural forces. It is later, in the Exodus events, that we meet the God of the storm who throws the lightnings and frightens with his thunder. Fittingly, in Genesis 17:22 and 35:13, when God leaves Abraham, the text says: 'God went up' without adding an expected 'to the heavens'. In Genesis 14:22, the power of God over nature is unmistakeably referred to: 'I raise my hand to the Lord, God Most High (El Elyon), Creator of Heaven and Earth.' *El qone erets*, El creator of earth, is a widespread Canaanite expression<sup>37</sup> which is used of the god who fertilizes the earth. However, Cazelles argues that it is modified by the insertion of the words 'of Heaven' which removes that aspect of God's character as a god of nature. Cazelles considers it to be closer to an early Mesopotamian description, 'god producer (*bani*) of the heaven and the earth'.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, it is only occasionally, and as a gift to his faithful follower, that the God of Abraham gives a good harvest, as to Isaac in Genesis 26:12 and in the blessing of Genesis 27:28.

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Furthermore, the God of Abraham is not a Divine Warrior involved in wars of conquest. The story of Abraham is not an epic work<sup>39</sup> narrating the glorious deeds of a hero. In the most warlike episode, when Abram attacks the kings (Gen. 14), the God of Abram does not intervene. He remains a personal God, a protector and a shield (Gen. 15:1). Only later, in the song of Moses, will Yahweh be described as intervening in history, throwing the enemy into the Sea (Exod. 15). He will conduct battles at the end of the wilderness period in the 'wars of Yahweh' (Num. 21:14), he will intervene in the wars of conquest, the wars of the Judges and of the Kings. But in the Abraham story God does not save through battles. Neither is he a God exercising justice upon the nations. He is described as 'just' only in relation to Abraham and his descendants (Gen. 18:19, 25). He chose Abraham so that the way of God, of righteousness and justice, might begin in that house and might be taught to his descendants.

Lastly, the God of Abraham is not described as 'holy' or as surrounded by an aura of holiness as the Canaanite 'Qadesh' or 'Benei-Qadesh'. The Canaanite conception of 'the holy' is not the holiness of the patriarchal narratives. Costecalde concludes his analysis of the root 'gdsh' and the notion of 'the holy' at Ugarit in the following way: 'One notices one feature which is permanent: anything that is near El, Baal, or any other deity is "gdsh". This includes the places visited by the gods (deserts, mountains, temples), the objects they handle (particularly cups), and the people they draw near to. The gods themselves are bathed in this aura of consecration and so receive the attribute of "qdsh".'<sup>40</sup>

This notion of 'gdsh' is absent from the patriarchal stories. After his blessing by 'El, your father' (Gen. 49:25) Joseph becomes a 'nazir' (v. 26), someone consecrated. But the root 'gdsh' is not used. The sacrifices offered by the Patriarchs have nothing in common with the Canaanite 'gdsh'. Covenant meals (*shelamim*) sealed the peace between two parties. They

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<sup>37</sup> F. M. Cross, 'El,' *TDOT I* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 256.

<sup>38</sup> H. Cazelles, 'Le Dieu,' 61.

<sup>39</sup> See C. Conroy, 'Hebrew Epic: Historical Notes and Critical Reflections,' *Biblica* 61 (1980), 1-30. 'JE material does not exhibit the characteristics of heroic literature nor does it reflect a state of society that could be called a Heroic Age' (21). Shemaryahu Talmon is even more radical: 'Biblical Israel did not produce epics nor did it foster the epic genre,' in 'The 'Comparative Method' in Biblical Interpretation: Principles and Problems,' *VTSup 29* (Leiden, 1977), 356.

<sup>40</sup> C-B. Costecalde, "'Qdsh' a Ugarit" in H. Cazelles and A. Feuillet (eds.) *Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible* Fascicule 59 (Paris: Letouzey & And, 1985), 1381. Translation mine.

were accompanied by a mutual oath and an exchange of gifts. The religious character of such meals is undeniable. The meal was preceded by the slaying of animals and the gods were invoked as witnesses. When Laban and Jacob make a pact (Gen. 31:53-54), Laban says: 'May the God of Abraham, the God of Nahor, the God of their father, judge between us' (v. 53). The text goes on: 'So Jacob took an oath in the name of the 'Fear of his Isaac', his father. Jacob offered a sacrifice (*zبH*) on the mountain and invited his kinsmen to the meal.' Nowhere is the notion of holiness—'gdsh'—referred to. The same applies when Abraham makes a covenant with God (Gen. 15:5; see also 21:27; 26:28-31).

Similarly, no mention is made of a *place* which is 'gdsh' in the course of Abraham's journeyings, although the name of the location Qadesh is mentioned in the narratives (Gen. 14:7, 16:14; 20:1). In all likelihood,

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Abraham did stop at some Canaanite places of worship, but unlike other descriptions elsewhere of Canaanite religious sites, these are never referred to as 'migdash', a sanctuary. Abraham built an altar at the 'Oak of the Seer' at Shechem (Gen. 12:6) and he planted a tree in Beersheba (Gen. 21:33) but none of these trees are 'gdsh'.<sup>41</sup> In the patriarchal period, particular religious places acquire great significance following important events which took place there, but our texts do not describe them as 'holy places'. This is illustrated by the story of Jacob's dream (Gen. 28:10-22). When Jacob woke up after his vision he said: 'How awesome (*nora*) is this place' (Gen. 28:17). He did not say that the place was holy. Marmre is simply described as an oak grove (Gen. 13:18), Lahai-Roi as a well (Gen. 16:14), and on Mount Moriah there was a bush and an altar (Gen. 22). Nowhere is the notion of 'gdsh' associated with these places.

There are a number of ways the God of Abraham shows attributes similar to those of the personal God.

A feature characterizing the patriarchal narratives is the marked preference for designating God by reference to the Patriarchs, in the same way that, in Mesopotamia, the personal God is defined by reference to the individual. God is defined as the God of Abraham, the *paHad* of Isaac ['terror' or 'parent' of Isaac<sup>42</sup>] (Gen. 31:5); he is the Strong One of Jacob, the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel (Gen. 49:24).

Like the Mesopotamian personal god, the God of Abraham always remains near the man who becomes his friend. The God of Abraham is where Abraham is. He is with him in Mesopotamia (Gen. 12:1), in Canaan, and he goes down with him to Egypt. When Abraham's servant goes to Aram Naharaim to find a wife for his master's son, the servant is aware that he needs the help of his master's God: 'May (Yahweh) the God of my master grant me success here today and show favour to my master Abraham' (Gen. 24:12, 42).

The God of Abraham speaks to him and makes known what he has to say. This is how the promises to the Fathers, which have been the object of so much study,<sup>43</sup> came to be made. These promises are given under the form of blessings. The object of a blessing is always to

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<sup>41</sup> The same applies to Jacob who set up a stone-pillar (Gen. 28: 18-19), but the place is not 'gdsh'.

<sup>42</sup> See W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity: Monotheism and the Historical Process* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1940), 248, n. 71 and D R Hillers, 'Pahad Yishaq,' *JBL* 91 (1972), 90-92.

<sup>43</sup> See particularly C. Westermann, *The Promises to the Fathers: Studies on the Patriarchal Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1980).

confer the power of life (descendants) and the possibility of living in a land and off the harvests it yields. It is significant that the first blessing given to Abraham in Mesopotamia takes up the familiar assurances of the personal god: many descendants and renown, 'a great name' (Gen. 12:2). In the other promises at Shechem, where the promise of land is given (Gen. 12:7), at Bethel, where the promise of the land extends to the four corners of the earth and where the descendants become a multitude compared to the dust of the earth (Gen. 13:14-17), the traditional pattern of things offered by the personal god is maintained, although it is added to and diversified by the inclusion of later elements.<sup>44</sup> Albert de Pury has produced a fuller and more refined

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analysis of the divine promises than that offered by Westermann.<sup>45</sup> Interestingly, he draws the conclusion that in its original form the divine promise in the patriarchal stories was an oracle of salvation whose function was to give assurance of divine help in a situation of distress.<sup>46</sup> Such a promise of help was precisely what would be expected from a personal god. De Pury's view seems to be confirmed by the content of the most simple promises which have not been overlaid with subsequent theological accretions. At the well of Lahai-Roi, God promises Hagar, fleeing the ill-treatment of Sarai, numerous descendants (Gen. 16: 6-14). This promise is enlarged in the blessing of Genesis 21:18 which comes as a response to Hagar's distress as her child's death seemed imminent: 'Lift the boy and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.' The promise made to Abraham concerning Sarah (Gen. 18:10) focuses on a descendant as well: 'Sarah your wife will have a son.' In chapter 17 the early basic elements of the promise are repeated (Gen. 17:2, 'You will greatly increase your numbers' and v. 6: 'I will make you very fruitful') but as a part of a covenant theology which is outside the framework of the relationship between a man and his personal god.

Not only does the personal God of Abraham speak to him but he also makes himself visible to him. In Mesopotamia 'to see the face of a god' meant to visit him in his temple, just as 'to see the face of a king' meant to visit the king in his palace.<sup>47</sup> It seems that it is precisely at existing places of worship that God appeared to Abraham as a personal God, and a striking feature of these episodes is that they are all linked by their use of the vocabulary of vision. God first appeared to Abraham at the oak tree of Moreh (Gen. 12:6). Later when he had settled, Abraham received a vision from God at the sanctuary of Mamre (Gen. 13:18; 15). The Moriah of Genesis 22 is associated through popular etymology with the verb *ra'ah*, to see, which is repeated in Genesis 22:4, 8 and 14. Significantly, Abraham names the place 'Adonai-Yireh', that is, 'Yahweh sees', to which the narrator is able to add the comment: 'whence the present saying: "On the mount of the Lord there is vision".' Hagar, likewise, has a revelatory experience—by a spring of water on the road to Shur (Gen. 16:1-16). As a result, 'she called the Lord who spoke to her: "you are El-Roi".' Although the Hebrew expression is ambiguous, it plays again on the verb *ra'ah*, to see, and allows one of the three following translations: 'God of seeing', that is, the 'all-seeing God'; 'God of my seeing', that is, the 'God I have seen'; or 'You are the God who sees me'.

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<sup>44</sup> As pointed out by C. Westermann, *Blessing in the Bible and the Life of the Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 53-59.

<sup>45</sup> A. de Pury, *Promesse Divine et Légende Cultuelle dans le Cycle de Jacob* (Paris: Gabalda, 1975) 2 vols.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 335.

<sup>47</sup> On 'seeing' the deity in Mesopotamia, see F. Nötscher, 'Das Angesicht Gottes schauen' nach biblischer und babylonischer Auffassung (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buckgesellschaft, 1969).

In the course of the development of the Israelite faith such expressions would evoke too strongly the vision of the statue of a god and would cease to be used.<sup>48</sup> But in the examples listed above it seems clear that the author sought to relate all the places of worship visited by Abraham to the verb 'to see'.

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The factor which remains to be studied is the names given to the personal God worshipped by Abraham. This is a difficult exercise, for in the hands of the scribes and theologians, many of the passages containing the divine name were reworked so as to state that Abraham worshipped God as Yahweh, the name of God revealed to Moses at a later date. For example, near Bethel, Abraham builds an altar to Yahweh and calls on the name of Yahweh (Gen. 12:8). On mount Moriah (Gen. 22:14) and at Mamre (Gen. 15) Yahweh is used again for the name of God. Although the original meaning of the name Yahweh is still a matter of much debate, it is important to note that in the past certain biblical scholars have suggested that the word could be a learned derivation from a very common word *iau*, *iaw* or *iahu*, which would be the transcription of the Babylonian possessive pronoun *iau(m)*, mine.<sup>49</sup>

It appears that the God of Abraham was in fact, as happened so often in Mesopotamia, without a proper name. He was known as Ilu, or El, the common noun for 'god' in the ancient Semitic world. It is thus understandable why it was that Abraham carried out acts of worship to Ilu or El in Canaan, where the noun designated also the supreme god. Melchizedek, the king of Salem and priest of El Elyon blesses him by 'El most High' (Gen. 14:18).<sup>50</sup> After the treaty with Abimelech, Abraham planted a tree in Beersheba and invoked the name of El Olam, the Everlasting God.

The god El also bore the name of 'father god' in the second millennium in Palestine and Syria. We have many examples from Ugarit and Mari where the name of a god was, in fact, a description of the god—made with the help of a verb stating something about this god. The biblical Abram is such a name. It is a theophoric name whose meaning is 'the father is exalted'.<sup>51</sup> The patriarch carries the name of his God which is 'the father is exalted'. We discover here again the notion of the personal god, where the individual is the son of his god, this being indicated in the name of the individual. It should be noted, however, that the ambiguous Babylonian notion of divine paternity with sexual connotations, and expressed in a name such as 'procreating father', is avoided here. Abram's name focuses more on the transcendence of God.

One final epithet given to El, the God of Abraham, and retained by the later tradition, is Shadday. Although the etymology is not certain, El Shadday is usually interpreted as 'the god

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<sup>48</sup> Christoph Dohmen: *Das Bilderverbot. Seine Entstehung und seine Entwicklung im Alten Testament* (Bonn: Hanstein Verlag, 1985), 236-277.

<sup>49</sup> H. Cazelles explores this theory in *Mari et l'Ancien Testament. 15e Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale. Liège 1966* (Paris 1967), 82-86. Freedman, O'Connor and Ringgren do not mention it in their article, 'YHWH,' *TDOT V* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 500-521.

<sup>50</sup> This has been noticed by Westermann, *Genesis 12-36* (London: SPCK, 1981): 'The title El-Elyon is comprehensible and meaningful in Genesis 14:18-20. The purpose is to designate the god of a Canaanite shrine, but at the same time to speak of him in such a way that Abraham can acknowledge him. The title is very suitable for this. El is the Canaanite and general Semitic title for God.... On the other hand, Elyon could be understood purely as a divine predicate, "the most high God" (204). As for 'Creator of heaven and earth', Westerman thinks that the formula represents a later stage of the religion, in a sedentary culture (206).

<sup>51</sup> T. L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham* (BZAW 133; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974), 22-36.

of the Mountain', or 'El, the One of the mountain'.<sup>52</sup> El Shadday is seen as the Canaanite chief god El. Vorländer, however, suggests that Shadday could be linked to the Mesopotamian shedu, the protector god.<sup>53</sup> A text of exorcism says: 'A kind shedu, a kind lamassu remains constantly at his side, just as the god who created him.'<sup>54</sup> The role of the shedu is seen here as the same as that of 'the god who created him', that is, the personal god. Vorländer says that in many Mesopotamian prayers the shedu and the personal god are associated with great consistency and in such a way

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that they may well represent the same deity. Likewise, the God of Abraham is also his protector, always unobtrusive but nonetheless effective. He gives him advice and throws light onto difficult situations such as the sending away of Hagar and Ishmael (Gen. 21:12), or protects him from Pharaoh (Gen. 12:10-20) and from Abimelech (Gen. 20:1-18). Later, it is Isaac when he is confronted with Abimelech's hostility (Gen. 26:28), Jacob before Laban (Gen. 31:24) and Esau (Gen. 32:10-12) who receive assistance from the counsel and protection of God. The intervention of God is always made quietly, except in Genesis 12:17 where God strikes Pharaoh with serious diseases. In the parallel story of Genesis 20:17-18, God strikes the wife and maidservants of Abimelech, king of Gerar, with sterility, which calls to mind the powers of fertility of the personal God. God also speaks to those who seek to destroy those in his care. He speaks with Abimelech in the same way that he spoke with Abraham about Sodom (Gen. 18:16-33). At other times God is presented as a powerful and active witness, but is silent in the proceedings. This comes out clearly in the story concerning the treaty between Abraham and Abimelech (Gen. 21:22-34) and in the sending of Abraham's servant to Aram-Naharaim to find a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24). God's help is acknowledged in such instances either by acts of worship (Gen. 21:33) or by prayers offered to him (Gen. 24:12-14, 21).

### THE PERSONAL GOD IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In the course of time, Yahweh, the God of Israel, would be known as Yahweh Sabaoth, the Warrior God, as a King, a Redeemer, a Saviour, a Creator. But the Genesis narratives remind us that at the beginning, he was the personal God of Abraham, recognized as the same personal God of Isaac and the personal God of Jacob. The God who united the tribes of Israel in a single faith, who joined the kingdom of David in a single worshipping community was also the God who communicated with each person individually—to enlighten, to protect and, in return, to require his trust. From the understanding of God as the personal God of Abraham to the understanding of God as the Lord of the tribes, there had to be another intermediary stage. This is when the God of Abraham and the God of the Patriarchs becomes the 'God of the father'.<sup>55</sup> This is a specific title given to a deity in the Ancient Near East. It is documented over a wide area from the 19th century BC in the Assyrian colony of Cappadocia to the Christian period.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> D. N. Freedman, "Who Is Like Thee Among the Gods?", 324.

<sup>53</sup> Vorländer, *Mein Gott*, 47, 215-224.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>55</sup> On the 'God of the Father' see A. Alt, 'The God of the Fathers' in *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), 1-66; J. P. Hyatt, 'Yahweh as the God of My Father,' *VT* 5 (1955), 130-136; M. Haran, 'The Religion of the Patriarchs,' *ASTI* 4 (1965), 30-55; F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1973), 4-43; N. Wyatt, 'The Problem of the "God of the Fathers",' *ZAW* 90 (1978), 101-104.

<sup>56</sup> H. Cazelles, 'Le Dieu,' 65.

The title appears from time to time in Genesis<sup>57</sup> and a particular feature of these texts is that the 'God of the father' is mentioned in situations where the one speaking finds it necessary to back up his authority with that of his ancestor and of his god who protects him. When Jacob and Laban conclude an agreement, a cairn is erected and

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an oath is sworn: 'Let the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor be judge between us.' Here the writer himself adds an explanatory comment to describe the divine witness: 'the God of their fathers' (Gen. 31:51-53). The connotation of this title extends the idea of a personal and protector god. It speaks of a special, personal relationship which is built up between the individual and his god. Later, at the burning bush, God says to Moses: 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob' (Exod. 3:6). This appears to be in the middle of the period in which God becomes the God of the fathers as he describes himself in Exodus 3:15 ('the God of your fathers has sent me to you'). This tribal God is to become the national God associated intimately with a land and a people, but with the well-known attributes of the great Semitic gods.

Throughout the triumphs of nationalism obtained and kept alive by kings and priests, throughout the excesses, the lies and religious manipulations practised by the leading classes in Israel and Judah, it was to be the role of the prophets to remind the people that the God of Israel was first and foremost the personal God of Abraham and of those who shared his faith. They sought to reaffirm the dangers of yielding to the temptation of prestige granted by the national gods of Assyria and Babylonia. The support given to a person by God as a personal God is precisely on the level of his very humanity: he helps him in taking moral decisions, guides him in making political choices or solving other kinds of problems. He is, by his very nature, independent of any state, unlike Ashur, Amnon or Marduk.

It is therefore not surprising that it was in the context of the Exile that the personal God of Abraham sought to reinstate in his people the teaching that he was not comparable to the great gods of the nations, that he was different from all the national idols, and that the model of a true relationship with him was to be found in a family-like tie: 'But you, O Israel, my servant, Jacob, whom I have chosen, you descendants of Abraham my friend' (Isa 41:8). And to remind the people of the fidelity of God the protector, it is again to Abraham that the prophet invites them to turn their eyes: 'Look to the rock from which you were cut, look to Abraham your father' (Isa 51:1-2).

When the revelation of God is studied from this perspective, it can be said that it is as the personal God of Abraham that the true God establishes a bridgehead in the midst of the polytheistic religions of the surrounding area.

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<sup>57</sup> The God of my father (Gen. 31:5, 42; Exod. 15:2, 18:4); the God of your father [singular] (Gen. 46:3; 49:25; 50:17; Exod. 3:6); the God of your father [plural] (Gen. 31:29; 43:23); the God of their father (Gen. 31:53); the God of your fathers (Exod. 3:13, 15, 16); the God of their fathers (Exod. 4:5).

Jean-Marc Heimerdinger, "The God of Abraham," *Vox Evangelica* 22 (1992): 41-56.

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