

# ABRAHAM AND THE UPANISHADS

by DAVID FLUSSER

*Dedicated to Shmuel Safrai*

Abraham, “the father of a multitude of nations” (Gen. 17:4), is seen by the three monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as their founder. This is not only because of the universalistic elements included in the faith of the Patriarch, but also because Abraham was the first to recognize God. Unfortunately, the Hebrew Bible itself does not indicate how Abraham discovered God and became the hero of the monotheistic faith. The recognition of the Creator by Abraham, the first believer, is depicted in the following parable told by R. Isaac (second half of the 3rd century C.E.):

This may be compared to a man who was travelling from place to place when he saw a building lighted. ‘Is it possible that the building lacks a person to look after it?’ he wondered. The owner of the castle looked out and said to him, ‘I am the owner of the building.’ Similarly, because Abraham our father said, ‘Is it conceivable that the world is without a guide?’ the Holy One, blessed be He, looked out and said to him, ‘I am the Guide, the Sovereign of the Universe.’<sup>1</sup>

However, today another legend dealing with the same subject is much more famous.

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David Flusser is Professor of Judaism of the Second Temple Period and Early Christianity in the Department of Religion at the Hebrew University.

1. Genesis Rabba 39:1 (Albeck, p. 365); English from *Midrash Rabbah* I, trans. H. Freedman (London & Bournemouth, 1951), p. 313 [at the end of the first sentence above, I have substituted the phrase “lighted” for Freedman’s translation, “in flames”]. See also E.E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem, 1979), I: pp. 30–31.

When the sun sank, and the stars came forth, he [Abraham] said, "These are the gods!" But the dawn came, and the stars could be seen no longer, and then he said, "I will not pay worship to these, for they are no gods." Thereupon the sun came forth, and he spoke, "This is my god, him will I extol." But again the sun set, and he said, "He is no god," and beholding the moon, he called her his god to whom he would pay Divine homage. Then the moon was obscured, and he cried out: "This, too, is no god! There is One who sets them all in motion."<sup>2</sup>

There is a basic difference between this legend and Rabbi Isaac's parable. According to the parable, Abraham took the first experimental step and then God looked out and told him that He was the governor of the world. The legend, on the other hand, describes how Abraham came to the conclusion, by means of a process of gradual deduction, that the true and only God is the "One who sets them all in motion."<sup>3</sup> The goal of Abraham's search had already been reached before he received the revelation of the One personal God. It is possible to assume that Rabbi Isaac was inspired by the legend, but this assumption cannot be based upon Rabbi Isaac's parable itself, because it is autonomous.

One significant fact should be better known: while our Jewish legend about Abraham evidently already existed in the second century B.C.E., it was largely ignored by the mainstream of rabbinic Judaism, and only much later did it become relevant for the explanation of monotheism. The legend appears neither in the Talmud nor in the classical collections of Midrashim, with the one exception of Genesis Rabbah 33:11, where it appears in a secondary formulation.<sup>4</sup> Evidently, it did not form an authentic part of the original midrash, but was added by the final redactor.<sup>5</sup> As we have already stated, the story only appears in later narrative rabbinic literature.<sup>6</sup>

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2. L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia, 1947), vol. I, p. 189 and vol. V, p. 210, note 16; see below for discussion of its sources.

3. The legend resembles the argument in Wisdom of Solomon 13:1–9. See on this passage D. Winston, *The Wisdom of Solomon* [The Anchor Bible Commentary. 43. (New York, 1979)], pp. 248–257.

4. Genesis Rabba 33:11 (to Gen. 11:28, ed. Albeck, pp. 363–5). See also the parallel in *Midrash Hagadol* to Gen. 15:7, ed. M. Margulies, p. 252 and see the note there.

5. In that context, the legend was adapted to a new framework and changed into a dialogue between Nimrod and Abraham. It becomes clear that the legend is an addition if one compares the text of Gen. R. with Seder Eliahu Rabba, chap. 6 (ed. M. Friedmann, Wien, 1904, p. 27, and see the note there). The story is narrated there without the whole legend, and only the worship of fire is mentioned, because it belongs to the story. See also the appendix to Seder Eliahu Zuta, p. 47–49.

6. See the preceding note and L. Ginzberg, vol. 5, p. 210, note 16; A. Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrash*, Jerusalem, 1938, vol. 1, p. 26, vol. 2, p. 118; and *Yashar*, ed. L. Goldschmidt, Berlin, 1923, p. 28. The most important evidence is, as it seems, *Midrash ha-Gadol* to Gen. 12:1, ed. M. Margulies, pp. 210–211. The source of the whole passage was discovered in the Genizah of Cairo and published by Jacob Mann, *The Bible as Read and Preached in the Old Synagogue*, I (Cincinnati, 1940), p. 49. The legend is also cited by Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hil. Avodah Zarah* 1:3. Cf. also Joseph ibn Kaspi, "Guide to Knowledge," chapter 7 (1332 C.E.), quoted in *Hebrew Ethical Wills*, ed., Israel Abrahams (Philadelphia, 1926), pp. 142–143.

However, as we have asserted, our legend already existed in the second century B.C.E. It is alluded to in the Book of Jubilees 11:16–18, and Josephus as well was evidently acquainted with the legend (*Ant.* I, 155–156). Finally, the legend appears in the Apocalypse of Abraham (Chapter 7),<sup>7</sup> from the end of the 1st or the beginning of the 2nd century C.E. Thus, our story is an outstanding example of a tendency in the history of Jewish literature, in which eminent narrative themes present in Jewish pseudepigraphic and Hellenistic literature are sometimes more or less absent in classical rabbinic sources, and then reappear in later narrative Jewish literature and in the Aramaic translations of the Bible. Often, it is precisely those stories which were incorporated into Christian and Moslem works which have also become popular among the Jews today. In fact, this particular legend about Abraham occurs in the Koran as well (3 Sura: 74–79).

According to the mainstream of Rabbinic tradition, God revealed himself to Abraham only after the Patriarch had discovered Him. As has already been mentioned,<sup>8</sup> according to Rabbi Isaac's parable, Abraham himself came to the conclusion that a world without a governor is unthinkable. Rabbi Simeon ben Yohai (2nd century C.E.) did not believe that Abraham had learned from his father or any other teacher, but that Abraham's kidneys became the fount of his knowledge — the kidney being the seat of understanding. Rabbi Levi (3rd century C.E.) stated simply that Abraham learned from himself.<sup>9</sup> While we see that the rabbinic sages were aware of the problem, the mainstream of rabbinic tradition did not refer to the gradual discovery of God by Abraham.

There is a parallel to our story in the apocryphal book of Ezra (I Esdras 3:1–4:63). The story centers around a contest among the three bodyguards of Darius. Each tried to correctly answer the question: What is the most powerful force in the world? The first youth claimed that wine is the most potent, while the second pointed to the power of the king. The third one observed that, although the king is great and wine is powerful, it is woman who dominates them all. He nonetheless asserted that truth is greater and incomparably stronger than all these

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7. There are now two important translations of the Apocalypse of Abraham: by R. Rubinkiewicz, in *The Old Testament Apocrypha*, ed. J.H. Charlesworth, vol. 1, Doubleday (New York, 1983) [chapter 7 is on page 692]; and Belkis Philonenko-Sayar, "Die Apokalypse Abraham," in *Jüdische Schriften aus hellenistisch-römischer Zeit*, vol. V (Gütersloh, 1982) [chapter 7 is on pp. 427–428; see there an important list of parallels].

8. See above, note 1.

9. See Gen. Rabba 95:3 (to Gen. 15:28; Albeck, p. 1189) and *ibid.*, chapter 61, beginning (to Gen. 25:1, *idem*, p. 657–8). See also W. Bacher, *Die Agada der Tannaiten*, vol. II (Strassburg, 1890 [reprint 1966]), p. 115, and note 2 there. See also L. Ginzberg, *Legends*, vol. 5, p. 225, note 100. There is also a Rabbinic legend that Abraham studied in the Academy of Shem and Eber; see Ginzberg, *Legends* V, p. 210, note 132 and p. 225, note 102.

things. It has already been rightly suggested that the story of the competition in I Esdras is Persian.<sup>10</sup> The similarity between this legend and that about Abraham raises the possibility that Abraham's quest for God had a Persian source. But can we proceed further?

There is an amusing Indian short story called "The Mouse Maiden,"<sup>11</sup> found in a work called *Panchatantra*, in which an Indian sage saved a young mouse and changed it into a maiden. When the maiden reached the appropriate age, the sage wished to find her a powerful husband who would be worthy of her. He summoned the venerable sun and said, "You are powerful; marry this my daughter!" But the sun replied to him, "Reverend sir, the clouds are more powerful than I, they cover me so that I become invisible." Then the sage said to a cloud, "Take my daughter!" But he answered, "The wind is stronger even than I am. It blows me hither and thither in all directions." Then he summoned the wind, but the wind replied to him, "Reverend sir, the mountains are more powerful than I, since I cannot move them so much as a finger's breadth." But when the sage summoned a mountain, he was told, "The mice are stronger than we, they make us full of countless holes on all sides." Thus, the sage turned the girl back into a mouse and found a mouse to take her as his wife.

The German translator of *Panchatantra*, T. Benfey, already made the connection between this Indian short story and our legend about Abraham.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the similarity between the Indian tale and the Jewish legend is striking. Even without additional Indian material, it is clear that the story about the mouse maiden is a kind of parody on a serious theme. We may even be able to guess how this parody came into existence. Among the Aesopian fables there is one which is pertinent to our theme,<sup>13</sup> namely, the fable of "The Weasel as Bride." Once a weasel fell in love with a handsome young man and Aphrodite changed it into a beautiful maiden. When the time for their wedding came, the goddess wanted to know whether the weasel's character had changed when it was

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10. Wilhelm Rudolph, "Der Wettstreit der Leibwächter des Darius 3. Esr. 3, 1-5, 6," *ZAW* 61 (1945-48), pp. 176-190.

11. *Panchatantra* III, 9. We used the English translation by Fr. Edgerton (Delhi: Hindu Pocket Books, 1973), pp. 127-128. A variant of the short story is a Latin fable written by Odo from Cherington (first half of the 13th century C.E.): *De mure qui voluit matrimonium contrahere* (About the Mouse who wanted to marry). The text and the German translation appears in H.C. Schnur, *Lateinische Fabeln des Mittelalters* (München, 1979), no. 63, pp. 290-293. See also Perry (note 12 below), p. 547 (no. 619). Compare Jean de La Fontaine, *Fables*, Book IX:7.

12. T. Benfey, *Panschatantra* (Berlin [1859] 1962), I, 376, 377; see L. Ginzberg, vol. 5, p. 210, note 16.

13. Aesopus 50 and Babrius 32. See *Corpus Fabularum Aesopicarum*, ed. A. Hausrath and H. Hunger (Leipzig: Teubner, 1920), vol. 1, pp. 69-70; *Babrius and Phaedrus*, ed. B.E. Perry (London: Loeb, 1975), pp. 44-47.

metamorphosed into the maiden. In order to test her, Aphrodite sent a mouse into the midst of the wedding party. The bride paid no attention to the guests present, but began to pursue the mouse in order to eat it. The goddess became angry and turned the girl into a weasel again.

Even with the help of a specialist in Indian culture, I have been unable to discover any Indian fable similar to the Greek fable of the weasel. Nevertheless, I assume that there must have been such a fable, which stimulated the creation of the parody, “The Mouse Maiden,” included in the *Panchatantra*. But even if we cannot find a parallel to the *Panchatantra* tale within the Indian tradition, its parodistic intention is patent. The similarity of this tale to the legend about Abraham also makes it probable that the tale about “The Mouse Maiden” is a humorous joke on a highly theological theme — the very same theme reflected in the legend about Abraham’s search for God. Fortunately, it is undisputed that this is precisely one of the main themes of the old Indian Upanishads,<sup>14</sup> which are generally thought to have originated in the 6th century B.C.E.

It would be both tedious and unnecessary to describe here the aims of the theology of the Upanishads, as any reader of these sacred texts can easily recognize them. The One Presence, which was experienced as the Self (*ātman*), or the Holy Power (*brahman*) absorbed their entire interest.<sup>15</sup>

Whatever is expressed in divine *personae* — or, for that matter, in any tangible, visible, or imaginable form — must be regarded as but a sign, a pointer, directing the intellect to what is hidden, something mightier, more comprehensive and less transitory than anything with which the eyes or emotions can become familiar... In India the quest for the primal force reached, in soaring flight, the plane of reality whence everything proceeds as a merely temporal, phenomenal manifestation. This ultimate power in the universe, and in man, transcends both the sensual and the conceptual spheres.... The crucial problem for a theologian is to make contact with the right divinities for the purposes of the time, and to ascertain, if possible, which among the gods is the most powerful in general.... The highest principle is to be discovered and mastered through wisdom.<sup>16</sup>

I have quoted here the words of one important scholar in support. However, as already stated, the message of the Upanishads themselves is obvious, as is its similarity to the meaning of the legend about Abraham. What is said there about Abraham’s search for God is a central concept in Upanishadic religiosity.<sup>17</sup>

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14. For this study, I have used the English translation from the Sanskrit by R.E. Hume, *The Thirteen Principal Upanishads* (Oxford, 1931 [reprinted Madras, 1954]). See also Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, New York, 1956.

15. Zimmer, p. 334.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 343–345.

17. See especially: Bṛihad-Āraṇyaka Upanishad II. 1.1–8 (Hume, pp. 92–94); *ibid.* II. 5.15 (p. 104); *ibid.* III. 6 (pp. 113–114); *ibid.* IV. 3.1–6 (p. 133); Taittiriya Upan. II.18 (pp. 288–289); Kaushitaki Upan. I. 3 (p. 304); Kaṭha Upan. V. 15 (p. 358); Muṇḍaka Upan. II. 2.10 (p. 373); Māitri Upan. VI. 35 (pp. 448–450).

Brahma is “the maker of everything, for he is the creator of all; the world is his: indeed, he is the world itself.”<sup>18</sup> He is also “the source and origin of the gods.”<sup>19</sup> God’s transcendence is described in the following stanza:

The sun shines not there, nor the moon and stars,  
These lightnings shine not, much less this (earthly) fire!  
After Him, as He shines, doth everything shine,  
This whole world is illuminated with His light.<sup>20</sup>

Another stanza describes the superiority of God in the following way:

Through fear of Him the Wind (Vāyu) doth blow.  
Through fear of Him the Sun (Sūrya) doth rise.  
Through fear of Him both Agni (Fire) and Indra  
And Death (Mṛityu) as fifth do speed along.<sup>21</sup>

One can easily discover parallels in the Upanishads to the Abraham legend.<sup>22</sup> The most striking one is the following:<sup>23</sup>

But [once] when Janaka, [king] of Videha, and Yājñavalkya were discussing together at an Agnihorta, Yājñavalkya granted the former a boon. He chose asking whatever question he wished. He granted it to him. So [now] the king, [speaking] first, asked him: “Yājñavalkya, what light does a person here have?” “He has the light of the sun, O king,” he said, “for with the sun, indeed, as his light one sits, moves around, does his work, and returns.” “Quite so, Yājñavalkya. But when the sun has set, Yājñavalkya, what light does a person here have?” “The moon, indeed, is his light,” said he... “Quite so, Yājñavalkya. But when the sun has set, and the moon has set, what light does a person here have?” “Fire, indeed, is his light,” said he... “Quite so, Yājñavalkya. But when the sun has set, Yājñavalkya, and the moon has set, and the fire has gone out, what light does a person here have?” “Speech, indeed is his light,” said he... “Therefore, verily, O king, where one does not discern even his own hands, when a voice is raised, then one goes straight towards it.” “Quite so, Yājñavalkya. But when the sun has set, Yājñavalkya, and the moon has set, and the fire has gone out, and speech is hushed, what light does a person here have?” “The soul (*ātman*), indeed, is his light,” said he, “for with the soul, indeed, as his light one sits, moves around, does his work, and returns.”

We must remember that in the Upanishads *ātman*, the Self, is identified with *brahman*, the Holy Power, who is God the Creator.

I hope that it has now become clear that nobody would find it strange or inappropriate were the hero of the story of Abraham’s discovery of God changed from the biblical Patriarch to an ancient Indian sage. It is true that the Jewish

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18. Bṛihad-Āraṇyaka Upan. IV, 4.13 (Hume, p. 142).

19. Śvetāśvatara Upan. VI, 14 (Hume, p. 404).

20. Kaṭha Upan. V. 15 (Hume, p. 358), Mundaka Upan. II. 2.10 (p. 373), and Śvetāśvatara Upan. VI. 14 (p. 410).

21. Taittirīya Upan. II. 8 (Hume, p. 288) and Kaṭha Upan. VI. 3 (p. 358).

22. For the most important of these, see above, note 16.

23. Bṛihad-Āraṇyaka Upan. IV. 3.1–6 (Hume, p. 133).

legend tends to be overly iconoclastic for an Indian; Abraham denies the divinity of the heavenly bodies, which would surely be considered too extreme in Indian eyes. But, on the other hand, the Upanishads often betray a similar, though somehow not so radical, revolutionary spirit. Sacrifice and works of merit towards hypostatized divinities are considered as futile in the light of metaphysical knowledge. The entire religious doctrine of different gods and the necessity of sacrificing to the gods is seen as a stupendous fraud by the man who has acquired metaphysical knowledge of the monistic unity of self and world in Brahman or Atman. "This that people say, 'Worship this god! Worship that god!' — one god after another — this is his creation indeed! And he himself is all the gods."<sup>24</sup> But even so, the existence of lesser divinities is not questioned — which is precisely the message of the Jewish legend, even if its theme *per se* does not completely exclude the possibility that the heavenly bodies, created by God, possess some divine power.

I admit that our "Indian hypothesis" will seem adventurous to some readers, but I did not reach India as a kind of new Sinbad. The Indian roots of this legend about Abraham are not so improbable as would seem at the first glance. I venture that the theme reached the Jews *via* Persia, through a Zoroastrian medium. In our sources, the legend about Abraham's quest for God was connected from the beginning with his fight against idolatry, his rescue from the fiery furnace and the death of his brother Haran by fire. Variants of these motifs already appear in the Book of Jubilees (11:16–18; 12:1–6, 12–14) from the 2nd century B.C.E. Moreover, it is not improbable that these sources attest to an older written legendary epic about Abraham's earlier days, perhaps similar in contents to the narratives told about Daniel.<sup>25</sup>

However, this problem is beyond the scope of the present study. What is significant for our purposes is that the main aim of this entire cycle of legends is to describe how Abraham discovered the theological truth of monotheism and demonstrated the futility of idolatry. The spiritual monotheistic and iconoclastic kerygma of the legends admirably fits the atmosphere of the post-exilic, Persian and Pre-Maccabaeen period.<sup>26</sup> One may speculate that these legends later constituted a special genre used to inculcate monotheistic beliefs among "God-fearers" and potential proselytes to Judaism in the Hellenistic world. If I am correct, its theology is common to both Judaism and Zoroastrianism. In this

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24. *Idem* I. 4.6 (Hume, p. 53).

25. The way in which Abraham demonstrated the stupidity of idolatry very much resembles the proofs offered by Daniel in the Legend of Bel and the Dragon in the Additions to Daniel.

26. This does not exclude the possibility that the cycle of legends about Abraham as a whole was conceived later. As we have seen, it existed already in the early Maccabaeen period, because it is attested to in the Book of Jubilees.

light, the path from India to Persia and from Persia to the Jews is easy to follow, both from the historical and from the geographical point of view.

My first step on the journey to India was when I recognized the similarity between Abraham's quest for God and the story in the Indian *Panchatantra*. Later, by mere chance, I was confronted with the Upanishads, as a consequence of which my initial assumption was strengthened. I have found that in the Upanishads one can find, not only numerous more-or-less similar parallels to the Jewish legends, but that its subjacent idea is essential for their own theology. It became clear, moreover, that although the story of Abraham's quest for God may be traced as far back as the second century B.C.E. in ancient Jewish pseudepigraphic and Hellenistic literature, it was not accepted into the mainstream of rabbinic tradition. Thus, the legend is contained only in later rabbinic narrative literature. I hope to show elsewhere that this paradoxical situation is by no means restricted to the legend about Abraham's quest for the one God. In our case, one point seems to me to be the most important, far more so than the pedigree and literary history of the legend. The probable foreign roots of the story about Abraham's search and the eminent importance of the legend for the understanding of the Jewish (and Christian and Moslem) faith are each meaningful. The god whom Abraham discovered was the impersonal cosmic supreme God, the Creator of the world and its Governor. While this is the essence of the God of Israel, He is also a personal and merciful God who answers and communicates his nature by revelation, as he has already done to Abraham himself. Thus God responded to Abraham's quest for him. According to Rabbi Isaac's parable, God looked out and said to Abraham, "I am the governor, the lord of the whole world."

Both these elements are likewise present in our legend about how Abraham came to recognize the creator through contemplation of the Creation, as it appears in *Barlaam and Ioasaph*, written by St. John Damascene (675–749).<sup>27</sup> There, the story concludes, "therein he recognized the true God, and understood him to be the maker and sustainer of the whole. And God, approving his fair wisdom and right judgment, manifested himself unto him and planted in Abraham more perfect knowledge; he magnified him and made him his own servant." Thus, philosophical monotheism is united with the revelation of the personal God.

And what was Abraham's reaction? The oldest witness of the legend also seems to contain the earliest reference to the post-biblical concept of the kingdom of heaven. According to the Book of Jubilees 12:19, after having attained knowledge of the one and only God, Abraham prayed to Him and said, "My God, the Most

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27. St. John Damascene, *Barlaam and Ioasaph* VII, 49–50 (London: Loeb, 1967), pp. 86–89. See B. Altaner and A. Stuiber, *Patrologie* (Freiburg: Herder, 1966), p. 529 and 530.



High God, you alone are God to me. And you created everything, and everything which is was the work of your hands, and you and your kingdom I have chosen.”<sup>28</sup> Is there already an allusion here to the famous biblical verse, “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord” (Deut. 6:4), by whose recital one proclaim’s God’s oneness, and by which very act one takes upon oneself the yoke of the kingdom of heaven?<sup>29</sup> In any case, Abraham’s proclamation in the Book of Jubilees supports the rabbinic view<sup>30</sup> that, until Abraham came, God ruled only in the heavens. It was Abraham who made God king over both the heaven and the earth. After having found God, Abraham accepted Him as his King.

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28. O.S. Wintermute, “Jubilees,” in J.H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, p. 81. Brad Young called to my attention the close relationship between the text in Jubilees and the mishnah cited in the following note.

29. M. Berakhot 2:2, 2:5; see also *Midrash ha-Gadol* on Deut. 6:4, S. Fisch ed. (Jerusalem, 1972), pp. 127–128 and the note there.

30. Sifre to Deut. 32:10, Finkelstein ed., pp. 354–355.