

Chapter 1

One God, Three Faiths

In This Chapter

- ▶ Revealing how religions worked prior to Abraham
 - ▶ Uncovering the origins of monotheism
 - ▶ Discovering how one God led to three religions
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In New York City alone, there are 6,500 or so Christian churches, according to the Internet. The Boston area is home to around 6,000 Christian churches. In fact, every American community features many different churches serving Christian residents of various denominations.

When you include buildings for Jews, Unitarian Universalists, Muslims, and other worshippers, our country seems awash in religious structures.

There are so many sects, so many denominations, so many beliefs, that the number of religions seems to multiply daily.

Yet, all of them have an origin. Everybody's religion, whatever anyone believes, started somewhere. In this chapter, we explore some of these starting points and show how they've affected the three major monotheistic religions of today: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Holy Toledo! How Many Gods Are There?

Originally, ancient people believed in magic. Their holy men, called *shamans*, practiced various rituals and had magical sayings that were supposed to heal illnesses, stop storms, grow crops, or change the future.

The people soon realized that these actions and spells didn't work, so they decided that great, distant beings, called *gods*, watched over all aspects of life and controlled everything. These deities could only be reached through rituals and prayer. The ancient people developed thousands of gods, each of whom was responsible for some aspect of human life.

Religion was born. Religion began as a way for people to understand lightning, thunder, good or bad fortune, birth, death, and all the other events in their lives.

Religion quickly became an integral part of life. For example, Egyptians, who originated one of the earliest civilizations, began to create rituals to “guarantee” that the Nile River flooded on time every year. When the Nile flooded, it brought rich, fertilizing soil to their farmland. Without it, they would starve. The Egyptians developed calendars based on the stars so they would know exactly when their gods would send the floods.

Not that far away from Egypt, Babylonians built large pyramid-like structures to their gods and invented a style of writing to record the amount of grain and beer that worshippers donated to their temples.

Every early religion worshipped many deities. Scientists call that belief *polytheism*, which means “many gods.” Still, some people began to believe that there was only one God who controlled everything.



The religions that believe in one God practice *monotheism* — the opposite of polytheism — which comes from the Greek for “one god.”

Monotheism Develops

Monotheists have never been the majority of humans. Even today, roughly half of all humans accept the idea that there is only one God. But the followers of one God belong to two of the world’s largest religions, Christianity and Islam. They developed their faith by building on ideas generated by an older religion, Judaism. Table 1-1 shows how the number of believers in each monotheistic faith compares to the others.

Table 1-1	Largest Monotheistic Faiths
Religion	Members
Christianity	2.1 billion
Islam	1.3 billion
Judaism	14 million
Baha’i	7 million
Unitarian Universalist	800,000

Ancient gods get a new life

Although few people today worship the ancient gods, their names live on in our everyday lives. Here are a few examples:

- ✓ Wednesday is named for Wodin, the chief god of the Norwegians.
- ✓ Thursday is named for Thor, another Norse god. He carried a big hammer, and when he threw it, it made a loud noise humans called thunder.
- ✓ Saturday is named for Saturn, a Roman god of agriculture.
- ✓ March is named for Mars, the Roman god of war.

- ✓ June is named for Juno, the chief Roman goddess.

There are many more: All the planets are named for Roman gods. Neptune, covered by a blue methane haze, got its name, for example, because Neptune was the Roman god of the deep blue sea.

Many companies today have taken symbols from ancient religions and use them in their logos. For example, the winged feet featured in the Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co. logo comes from the shoes worn by Mercury, the swift messenger of the Roman gods.

Egypt tries the one-god concept

Historians think the first people to be monotheists were the Egyptians, although their belief didn't last long. Egyptians developed several important gods, including one named Ptah. He was once the chief deity of a city, but eventually became the main god of the country. The other gods were seen as manifestations of Ptah. All people had to do was pray to Ptah, regardless of other gods.

Later, after the god Amon had replaced Ptah in the Egyptian belief system, an Egyptian leader (called *pharaoh*) named Amonhotep IV became tired of having his rule interfered with by priests. So, he changed his name to Ikhnaton around 1300 BC and declared that the god Aton was the only god.

Ikhnaton is the first person known in history to have declared that his god was the only god. In many ways, he had no choice.

- ✓ If he suffered a defeat in a war, or if there was a natural disaster, people in his country would say that another god was stronger than Aton. If there were no other gods, Ikhnaton wouldn't face that problem.
- ✓ If something did go wrong, Aton could be called on to reverse the situation. If there were other gods, and the problem disappeared, Ikhnaton would have faced competition from the priests of the rival god. Having only one god prevented that.

- ✓ Egyptians thought that Ikhnaton was the living embodiment of god. It was far easier for him to perform the proper rituals and observe holidays for one deity than for a multitude.
- ✓ Ikhnaton destroyed the power of the priests of Amon, while creating a priesthood of Aton that was totally beholden to him.
- ✓ Human nature tends to narrow down the list of gods anyway. Even the Romans, who had multiple gods, often combined them, paring down the total.

Ikhnaton's religion was the first-known true monotheism and occurred about 1,300 years before Jesus. The belief in Aton was recorded in pictures on temple walls and in letters. Ikhnaton's reign today is best known for the magnificent bust of his beautiful wife, Nefertiti, which is considered the finest statue to survive from ancient Egypt.

Ikhnaton ruled for a handful of years, and his religion died with him. Only when ancient letters from his reign were dug up in the 1900s did we know how much confusion he caused.



Sigmund Freud, who developed psychology in the late 1800s, suggested that the priests of Ikhnaton may have taken their dying faith to the slaves, helping generate Judaism. Later scholars don't think that happened. For starters, the Jews worshipped a God named Yahweh, not Aton.

Yahweh steps down from the mount

One group of people who lived in the middle of all these religious ideas was called *Semites*. Semites are credited with developing modern monotheism.

Most non-Egyptian residents of the ancient Near East were Semites. Several times, they invaded Egypt and conquered the land. At other times, they built great empires. The Babylonians, the Assyrians, and the Israelites were all Semites.

The first famous Semite who promoted monotheism was a man we know as Abram, who would later have his name changed to Abraham. He would identify his God as Yahweh.

Yahweh means "I am that I am" or "I was what I was." Yahweh was originally viewed as a mountain deity who appeared in thunder and lightning. His "still, small voice" was heard by those who believed in him and who listened to him (1 Kings: 19:2).



Yahweh's commands and directions were eventually written down in books that were collected in what we call the Bible.



When did Abraham live?

One famous historian, American archaeologist William Albright, suggested Abraham was born about 4,000 years ago. Albright based that dating on contracts that Abram signed with the Hittites and the Philistines, people who lived in neighboring countries. Those contracts are mentioned in the Bible.

Today, historians believe the biblical contracts resemble contracts from around 900 BC rather than the older ones Albright cited.

Unfortunately, the Philistines and Hittites aren't around to ask. The Philistines probably showed

up in Israel about 3,200 years ago. The Hittites, who lived in what is now Turkey, were really important 3,400 years ago. Both disappeared from history before the first books of the Bible were written down around the sixth century BC.

Today, historians have no idea when Abraham lived, but 4,000 years ago is a convenient place to start (which is what we decided to do for the timeline in Appendix A). People then didn't have a universal calendar like we do, so dates are difficult to figure out.

Following Abraham's Lead: Judaism

The children of Abraham believed in Yahweh, but they weren't true monotheists for centuries. They had other gods. We see that fact in people's names, which contained the names of other deities. For example, an ancient Israelite prince's name included the name of the Canaanite fertility god, Baal, and so on.

Some of the names endure today: *Daniel*, *Nathaniel*, and *Rachel*, among others, contain the name of the bull god of the Canaanites, *El*. Later, followers of Yahweh borrowed that name and gave it to their God. In time, Yahweh was known by many names.

Josiah and his faith: The beginnings of Judaism

Eventually, all the other gods disappeared in the Jewish land. In the seventh century BC, the followers of Yahweh lived in the small country of Judah and were threatened by armies from Babylonia. The Judean priests then claimed to have found a book that reported the history of the people and how God didn't accept other gods. The king of Judah, Josiah, was so moved that he ordered the other religious symbols stored in the temple to be destroyed.



From that time on, monotheism was the only belief of these people, whom we know today as Jews.

Their name was derived from the country, Judah, which was once the name of a mountainous region around their capital city, Jerusalem. The people living there were known as Judahites. When the Judahites became the largest tribe, their name evolved into the name of their religion, Judaism.

Josiah really felt that by worshipping one god, he and his people would be protected against the Babylonians. In those days, a people's deity was responsible for shielding his people against the wrath of other gods. If the enemy conquered, that meant the losers had a weaker god, so they gladly accepted the stronger deity as their own.

That's what happened after the ten tribes north of Judah had banded together under the name of Israel. When they were conquered by the Assyrians around 722 BC, they adopted the Assyrian gods and disappeared from history. We know them as the *Ten Lost Tribes*. They probably accepted the Assyrians gods when their deity failed to shield them.

The priests of Judah had other ideas. They said that, win or lose, Yahweh was god. The priests made several important decisions that helped guarantee that their religion would survive:

- ✓ **They said there were no other gods.** Other monotheists accepted the existence of different gods, but said their god was watching over them. *Jews simply argued there were no other gods.* In a way, they had no choice. If they accepted the existence of other gods, and their country was conquered, their people would believe the other gods were stronger. Eliminating other gods, as Ikhnaton had done in Egypt (see the earlier section, "Egypt tries the one-god concept"), erased that threat to their belief.
- ✓ **The priests banned images of God.** Previously, people always made idols to represent their deities. Jews did not. Their God was invisible and would always be with them. Ironically, perhaps because of this ban, few Jews have ever excelled in the visual arts.
- ✓ **The priests insisted that their God was not responsible for just the Jews, he was universal.** Previously, deities were assigned different countries as their "portion." With no other gods, Yahweh was responsible for everyone.

God becomes universal

The Bible contains a book, dated to the sixth century BC, that tells us when the Jews decided Yahweh was God, wherever they lived.

The prophet Jonah, in the text that bears his name, was ordered by God to go to Nineveh to preach to the people there. Nineveh was the capital of Assyria, so the people Jonah was to talk to were the members of the ten conquered Israeli tribes now living in their conqueror's land. Jonah didn't want to go, so God sent a "great fish" (today we believe it was a whale) to swallow him and deposit him on Assyrian soil. Jonah reluctantly preached to the people, and, to his amazement, his audience listened. (Check out Jonah 1:15–4:2 for the story of Jonah's ordeal.)

This is the first recorded incident where God is seen as universal; that is, not limited by any borders, nor even by the condition of his believers.

God provides protection and an identity

The idea of a universal God shielded the Jews from adopting rival religions when they were conquered. The Babylonians were the first to enslave the Jews. After Josiah was killed fighting the Egyptians, the Babylonians had little trouble taking Jerusalem in 597 BC. The Jews, like the Israelites in the north, were required to leave their homeland.

However, they carried the idea of monotheism with them. As a result, they weren't tempted to follow the Babylonian gods. When the Persians defeated the Babylonians about 60 years later, the Jews were free to return home. They were convinced that God had acted on their behalf. Monotheism was now firmly entrenched.

Jews were the only monotheists then, but they soon had company. For more on the history and practices of Judaism, see Chapters 3 and 4.

The many meanings of "Semite"

The name *Semite* is derived from a story in the Bible about a great flood. In the story, Noah, his three sons, and their families escape the rising water by building a large boat (better known in the story as an *ark*) and filling it with animals. Everyone else in world drowned, so everyone living now must be related to Noah's family.

One of his sons was called Shem. All the people supposedly related to him today are still known as "Semites."

Scholars who study language eventually used the term *Semitic* to refer to anyone who speaks Hebrew, Arabic, and related tongues. Today, Semite means Jewish to most people. This is the main usage, versus a general term for a group of people who created a civilization in and around the ancient Middle East.

Christianity: Crossing in a New Direction

Jesus and his new religion, Christianity, arrived about 600 years after the Jews became total monotheists. By then, the Jews had escaped control by the Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks, only to be overtaken by the newest world power, the Romans.

Some Jews saw the Roman conquest as a decision by God to punish the Jews for failure to follow his laws. They looked for someone to lead them back into God's good graces.

In time, they saw Jesus as that person, the *Messiah*, or anointed king. Born in Galilee, the northern part of the Roman state of Judea, Jesus was crucified on a cross around AD 30. That cross became a symbol of a new religion, which took its name from the Greek word for "messiah," *Christ*.

Paul finds a way to link beliefs

Christians argued that they had replaced the Jews as God's "chosen people." They also were sure that the world was coming to an end and that only people who followed Jesus's teaching would be taken into heaven (see Chapter 14).

That message was spread by a man we know as Paul. Like Abraham, though, we don't know what he looked like, but he left behind letters written to small congregations he founded around the Roman Empire.



Paul's letters, known by their Greek name, *epistles*, were combined with four biographies (called *Gospels*) of Jesus to create another Bible, called the *New Testament*.

Eventually, Christians combined the Jewish Bible, what they called the *Old Testament*, with their book to create a single sacred text. Jews don't recognize the New Testament because they don't believe Jesus is the Messiah or that God shifted his protection from them to Christians.

The Christian message spreads through the empire

The second great monotheistic religion took a while to win acceptance. The Romans hated the Christians, because, among other reasons, they refused to worship the emperor like a god.

Dodging arrest, Paul traveled widely and was able to reach many people. He and his companions spoke at Jewish religious houses (called *synagogues*) and convinced many people to follow Jesus. He taught monotheism, but said God sent Jesus to lead people to the truth.

Then in AD 70, the Romans who were fighting Jewish rebels destroyed the Temple (see Chapter 10), the central religious site of ancient Jews. To many people, this was proof that God had deserted the Jews. Paul was dead by then, but his message now took on new urgency. Christianity began to grow. Roman emperors fought against Christianity before Constantine embraced it. By the end of the fourth century, it had become the only legal religion of the empire.

The second great monotheistic religion was in place. It is also the second religion (after the first, Buddhism) that would attempt to become a world religion. We cover the history and practices of Christianity in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

Islam: Submitting to God

In the desert land southwest of Judah, another religion began to develop in the seventh century AD. Eventually, it would become the third large monotheistic faith, and the third attempt (after Buddhism and Christianity) at a world religion spanning the globe.

Its founder was Muhammad, a herder who listened to the stories of Jewish and Christian travelers. He lived in Mecca, a crossroads city in the desert far south of Jerusalem. Nearby was a stream that local residents insisted had been visited by Abraham. Mecca also housed the most sacred object in the region. Called the *Ka'baa*, it was a stone believed to have come from heaven (for more on the *Ka'baa*, see Chapter 7).



Around his 40th birthday, Muhammad began to tell his relatives that the angel Gabriel had visited him and called on him to become a prophet of God. In his language, the word God was pronounced *Allah*.

Muhammad called this new monotheistic religion *Islam*, which means “submission.” The name is derived from the Arabic word for peace, *salaam*. Members of the new faith are called *Muslims*, which means “he who submits.”

Muhammad said that Ishmael, Abraham’s oldest son, was the father of the Arabs. Jews claim they descend from Isaac, Abraham’s second son. Therein lies the split between the two religions, traced back to a favored son.

Islam started slowly, like Christianity, but surged in strength in only a few years when Muhammad and his small band surprised and routed a bigger, more seasoned army of Meccans. The next hundred years after Muhammad lived saw Islam spread with amazing rapidity, reaching faraway borders.

Convinced by the victory that Muhammad's deity was stronger than their pagan gods, many Arabs flocked to Muhammad's banner. The third of the great monotheistic religions had taken its place under the sun. Chapters 7 and 8 cover the history and practices of Islam.