

not fools, we ought to try to imagine ourselves into their heads. In worshipping the gods, what exactly did a person worship?

Jewish tradition offers surprising answers. One opinion, informed by kabbalah, Judaism's mystical tradition, delicately suggests that what the idolaters worshiped were really aspects of God, pagan religion arising from "the deification by the pagans of cosmic forces corresponding to the various divine attributes."²⁰ Hence the biblical title given to the Holy One: "God of gods." Another view equates the gods with demons, shadow beings held by the Mishnah to have been created by God shortly after He first breathed a soul into a human body.²¹

A modern rationalistic account of the pagan mind urges us to take seriously what the idolaters of old themselves said about their relationship with the gods. Professor Julian Jaynes, author of *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bimembral Mind*, taught psychology at Princeton from 1966 to 1990, but he also educated himself in the literatures of the ancient world. He urged that we consider the somewhat hard-to-process fact that idolatry focused literally on the worship of idols.

Ordinary men had their personal gods, accommodated in household shrines. The chief god of a city would have his house in the middle of town, in the religious compound surmounted by the ziggurat. As if the wooden image were truly alive, priests carried him about, served him food and drink, and provided all manner of other services, including sexual ones. The god was clothed in rich garments, and at festival times took trips to visit other gods in their temples. Men were the servants of the gods, who called them the "blackheaded ones." In return for services, the gods spoke to men.

They literally spoke, or at least men thought they heard their voices. In Mesopotamia, the voice belonged to the *ili*, the personal god, while in Egypt it belonged to the *ka*, the hard-to-translate lynchpin of all Egyptian thinking about religion and personality, which Jaynes calls the "voice-persona." Essentially the ancients hallucinated the god voices in much the same way that schizophrenics in contemporary times hear voices. The voice was generated in the brain's right temporal lobe. It then traveled across the anterior commissure and was "heard" in the left temporal lobe—heard not, however, as the voice of consciousness we hear today when we think consciously about ourselves, but as a voice from outside, sometimes accompanied by hallucinated visual images. This "bimembral" structure of the pagan mind is to be distinguished from consciousness as we know it, for in fact people then were

not "conscious." Jaynes demonstrates convincingly that consciousness is not a prerequisite to learning or to civilization. (Think of the way you drive a car, a complex activity carried out for the most part unconsciously.) When a person needed to make a choice, he heard the voice of his god and obeyed.

The god voices were the main vehicle of social control. Up to a certain level of civilizational complexity, everyone knew his place and his role from the voices. Then, Jaynes argues, writing developed in Mesopotamia around 3000 B.C. This allowed for the recording of divine instructions, or laws, on clay tablets in the medium called cuneiform, a system of some six hundred characters mixing the features of an alphabet with those of pure hieroglyphics, or picture symbols. With these instructions available to be consulted at any time, the need for hallucinations was obviated.

The most celebrated legal code in the ancient world, Hammurabi's, was set down at Babylon about 1750 B.C., within decades of Abraham's birth. By the thirteenth century B.C., the breakdown of the bimembral mind in the Near East had been completed. As recorded in inscriptions, Mesopotamians begin to lament the quieting of the god voices, which had fallen into silence.

However we understand pagan consciousness, it is clear that by the time Abraham was born a major spiritual evolution was under way. His was an era of transformation, and anxiety. From about 3000 B.C., it is as if history was tearing up the soil in the field where the seeds of Abraham's teaching would be planted.

The social and political chaos of the second millennium B.C. played a role in this process, further roiling the Mesopotamian soul. A century or so before Abraham's birth, Sumerian civilization was transformed by the influence of Semitic invaders from the Syrian desert, called Amorites or Martu, meaning "Westerners." It is likely that some of Abraham's ancestors belonged to this group. Cultivated men at Ur detested the Amorite: a nomad "who lives in a tent, exposed to wind and rain; . . . who eats raw foods; who has no home during his lifetime and no tomb at his death," "who does not know grain," these "raiders . . . with animal instincts, like wolves."²²

The monarchs of Ur fortified their borders against marauding outsiders. However, these defenses were unequal to the strength of the enemy. By the end of the twentieth century B.C., Sumner was completely overwhelmed by Amorites and other foreigners. The last king of the Third Dynasty of Ur was captured and led off in chains. Preserved in cuneiform, a final communication from this monarch, Ibbi-Sin, is a letter like a distress signal from a sink-