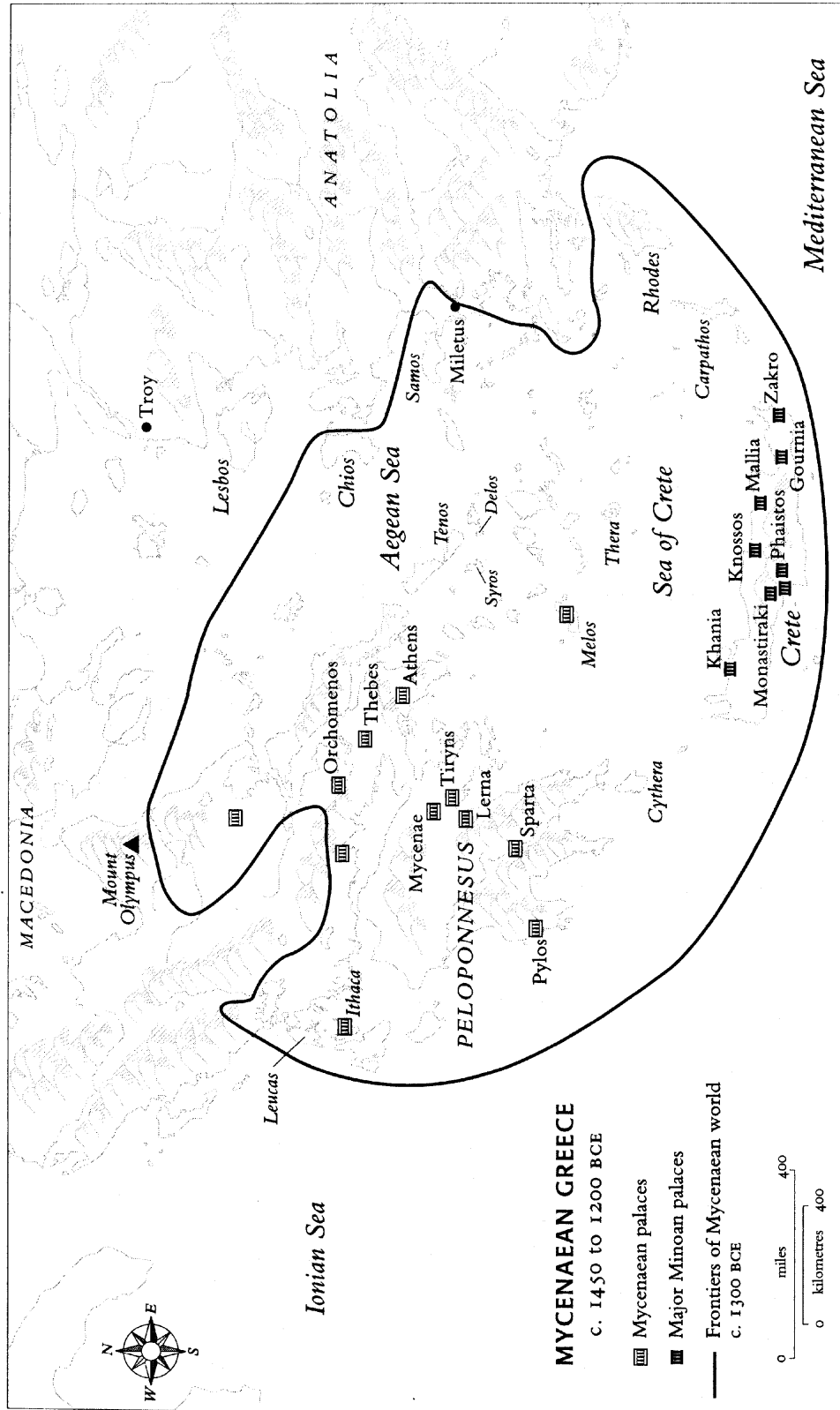


RITUAL

(c. 900 to 800 BCE)

The crisis in the eastern Mediterranean hit Greece in about 1200. It is possible that in a last burst of energy the Mycenaean Greeks destroyed the city of Troy in Asia Minor: archaeologists have unearthed evidence of devastation, which they believe took place in the second half of the thirteenth century. But like the kingdoms of the Near East, the Mycenaean kingdom also collapsed, and Greece entered a dark age that lasted for four hundred years. The Mycenaeans had controlled the region since the fourteenth century. They had established a commercial network of cities, which exported olive oil to Anatolia and Syria in return for tin and copper. Unlike the Minoan civilization (c. 2200 to 1375) that preceded it, Mycenaean society was aggressive and martial. The Minoans, who had ruled from Knossos in Crete, seem to have been gentle, peaceful people. Their palaces, beautifully decorated with lyrical, brilliantly coloured frescoes, were not fortified, and war was a distant threat. But the Mycenaean Greeks dominated the masses by showy displays of the latest military technology. They had war chariots imported from the Hittite empire, powerful citadels, and impressive tombs. The king had developed an efficient administration. From their capital in Mycenae, the Mycenaeans had ruled Messenia, Pylos, Attica, Boetia, Thessaly, the Greek islands, and Cyprus. By the thirteenth century, according to Hittite sources, they had begun to raid the coastal cities of Asia Minor.

This powerful civilization virtually disappeared overnight. The cities of the Mycenaean heartland—Pylos, Tiryns, and Mycenae—were all destroyed, possibly by the sea peoples. Some of the population migrated to Arcadia and Cyprus, and Achaea in the northern Peloponnesus became an enclave for Mycenaeans, who would henceforth be known as the Achaeans.¹ But otherwise, they left scarcely a trace. The Mycenaeans had



adapted the Minoan script to their own language, but the texts that have survived are simply lists of equipment, provisions, and purchases, so we know very little about their society. But it seems to have been run on Cretan and Near Eastern lines and bore little relationship to the Greek culture that would develop during the Axial Age.

The Greeks were an Indo-European people, who had begun to settle in the region in about 2000.² Like the Aryans of India, they had no memory of the steppes, and assumed that their ancestors had always lived in Greece. But they spoke an Indo-European dialect, and had some of the same cultural and religious customs as the Indo-Aryans. Fire was important in the Greek cult, and Greeks were also passionately competitive, making a contest out of anything they could. At first the Greek tribes had settled on the fringes of Minoan society, but by 1600 they had begun to establish a strong presence on the mainland, and were ready to take control and establish the Mycenaean kingdom when, after a series of natural disasters, Minoan civilization declined.

We know very little about either Minoan or Mycenaean religion. From the sculpture and votive offerings discovered by archaeologists, it appears that the Minoans loved dancing and processions; they had a cult of sacred trees, offered animal sacrifices to their gods on mountain peaks, and had ecstatic visions. Gold rings and statuettes show men and women, alert and erect, with eyes straining towards a goddess figure floating in the sky. Burial grounds were holy places. The king was the partner of the gods: seals show him in conversation with a goddess, who hands him a spear or staff. Some of these rituals would survive in later Greek religion, and the Mycenaean texts mentioned gods who would continue to be important in the later Greek pantheon: Zeus, Athena, Poseidon, and Dionysus.

But the disastrous collapse of the eastern Mediterranean severed the Greeks irrevocably from both these civilizations. Greece lapsed into illiteracy and relative barbarism; there was no central authority, and local chieftains ruled the various regions. Communities were isolated, and there were no more contacts with the Near Eastern countries, which were also in crisis. There was no more monumental building, no more figural art, and craftsmanship declined. Poets kept some of the old legends alive. They looked back on the Mycenaean period as a heroic age of magnificent warriors. They told stories about Achilles, the greatest of the Achaeans, who had been killed during the Trojan War. They recalled the tragic fate of Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, who had died in a divinely decreed vendetta. They kept alive the memory of Oedipus, king of Thebes, who, not realizing who they were, had killed his father and married his mother. The

bards wandered around Greece and helped to give the scattered communities a shared identity and a common language.

One of the few cities to survive the crisis was Athens, in eastern Attica, which had been an important Mycenaean stronghold. The city declined and its population diminished, but the site was never entirely abandoned. By the middle of the eleventh century, however, Athenian craftsmen had begun to produce sophisticated pottery, decorated in what is now called the Proto-Geometric style, and at the same time, some Athenians migrated to Asia Minor, where they founded settlements along the Aegean coast that preserved the city's Ionian dialect. In the late tenth century, new villages began to appear in the countryside around Athens, and the population of Attica was divided into four tribes (*phylai*), which were administrative rather than ethnic units—like “houses” in a British public school. The tide was beginning to turn for Athens. Later this resurgence was attributed to Theseus, the mythical king of Athens.³ Every year the Athenians would celebrate Theseus's unification of their region in a religious festival on the Acropolis, the sacred hill beside the city.

In the ninth century, Greek society was still predominantly rural. Our chief sources are the epics of Homer, which were not committed to writing until the eighth century, but which preserved some ancient oral traditions. The wealth of the local *basileis* (“lords”) was measured in sheep, cattle, and pigs. They lived in a world apart from the farmers and peasants, and still thought of themselves as warriors. They boasted loudly about their exploits, demanding acclaim and adulation, and were fiercely competitive and individualist. Their first loyalty was to themselves, their families, and their clans, rather than to the city as a whole. But they felt kinship with their fellow aristocrats throughout the Aegean, and were prepared to cooperate generously with them and offer hospitality to travelers.

But towards the end of the dark age, trade revived in the Aegean. The aristocrats needed iron for their weapons and armour, and luxury goods to flaunt in their rivals' faces. Their first trading partners were Canaanites from the northern coastal cities, whom the Greeks called Phoenicians because they had the monopoly on the only colourfast purple (*phoinix*) dye in antiquity. At first the Greeks had resented the Phoenicians, whose culture was far more sophisticated than their own. But by the ninth century, they had begun to work creatively together. The Phoenicians established a base in Cyprus, and Phoenician craftsmen came to work in Athens, Rhodes, and Crete. Phoenician colonists began to open up the western Mediterranean, and in 814 they established Carthage on the north African coast. They showed the Greeks the mercantile potential of the sea,

and the Greeks began to make new foreign contacts in Syria. In the late ninth century, Phoenicians, Cypriots, and Greeks founded the commercial centre of Al-Mina at the mouth of the river Orontes, which traded slaves and silver in return for iron, metalwork, ivories, and fabric.⁴

Greece was coming back to life, but the people remained in a spiritual limbo. A few elements of the old Minoan and Mycenaean cults remained: there was, for example, a sacred olive tree on the Acropolis.⁵ But the thirteenth-century crisis had shattered the old faith. The Greeks had watched their world collapse, and the trauma had changed them. The Minoan frescoes had been confident and luminous; the men, women, and animals depicted had been expectant and hopeful. There were apparitions of goddesses in flowery meadows, dancing, and joy. But by the ninth century, Greek religion was pessimistic and uncanny, its gods dangerous, cruel, and arbitrary.⁶ In time, the Greeks would achieve a civilization of dazzling brilliance, but they never lost their sense of tragedy, and this would be one of their most important religious contributions to the Axial Age. Their rituals and myths would always hint at the unspeakable and the forbidden, at horrible events happening offstage, just out of sight, and usually at night. They experienced the sacred in catastrophe, when life was turned inexplicably upside down, in the breaking of taboos, and when the boundaries that kept society and individuals sane were suddenly torn asunder.

We can see this dark vision in the terrifying story of the birth of the Greek gods. In the Greek world, there was no benevolent creator god and no divine order at the beginning of time but only relentless hatred and conflict. At first, it was said, there had been two primal powers: Chaos and Gaia (Earth). They were too hostile to procreate, so they generated their offspring independently. Gaia produced Uranus (Heaven), the Sky God, and then gave birth to the seas, rivers, hills, and mountains of our world. Then Gaia and Uranus lay together, and Gaia gave birth to six sons and six daughters. These were the Titans, the first race of gods.

But Uranus hated his children, and forced all twelve of them back into Gaia's womb the minute they were born. Eventually, in agony, Gaia begged her children for help, but only Cronus, her youngest son, had the courage to do as she asked. Crouched in his mother's womb, he lay in wait for his father, armed with a sickle, and the next time Uranus penetrated Gaia, he cut off his genitals and threw them to the earth. High Gods were often overthrown by their more dynamic children, but few myths make the primordial struggle as perverse as this. Cronus was now the chief god, and he released his brothers and sisters from the depths of Earth. They mated with one another to produce a second generation of Titans, which

included Atlas, who supported the earth on his shoulders, and Prometheus, who stole fire from heaven and gave it to human beings.

Instead of learning from the horror of the past, however, Cronus was as tyrannical as his father. He married his sister Rhea, who gave birth to five children—the second race of gods: Hestia (guardian of the sacred hearth), Demeter (goddess of grain), Hera (patron of marriage), Hades (lord of the underworld), and Poseidon (god of the sea). But Cronus had been told that one of his children would supplant him, so he swallowed each infant immediately after its birth. Pregnant with her sixth child, Rhea turned to her mother, Gaia, in desperation, and when baby Zeus was born, Gaia hid him on the island of Crete, while Rhea presented Cronus with a stone, wrapped in swaddling clothes, which he duly swallowed, without noticing anything amiss. When Zeus grew up, he forced his father to disgorge his brothers and sisters, and the family took up residence on Mount Olympus. Cronus tried to fight back. For ten years he and some of the other Titans waged war on the Olympians, in a battle that shook the cosmos to its foundations, until Zeus achieved the final victory, and imprisoned his father and those Titans who had supported him in Tartarus, a dark and horrible region in the depths of the earth.

Meanwhile, Chaos, the second primal power, had generated his own terrifying offspring: Erebus (the “Dark Place,” in the deepest recesses of the earth) and Night. Night then produced a brood of daughters, who included the Fates (Moirai), the Death Spirits (Keres), and the three Furies (Erinyes).⁷ The Erinyes were particularly frightening; the Greeks imagined them as repellent hags, wreathed in snakes, crawling on all fours to scent their prey, whining and howling like dogs. One myth says that they were born from the drops of blood that fell upon the earth when Cronus hacked off Uranus’s genitals. So they were older than the Olympians, and family violence was inscribed into their very being.

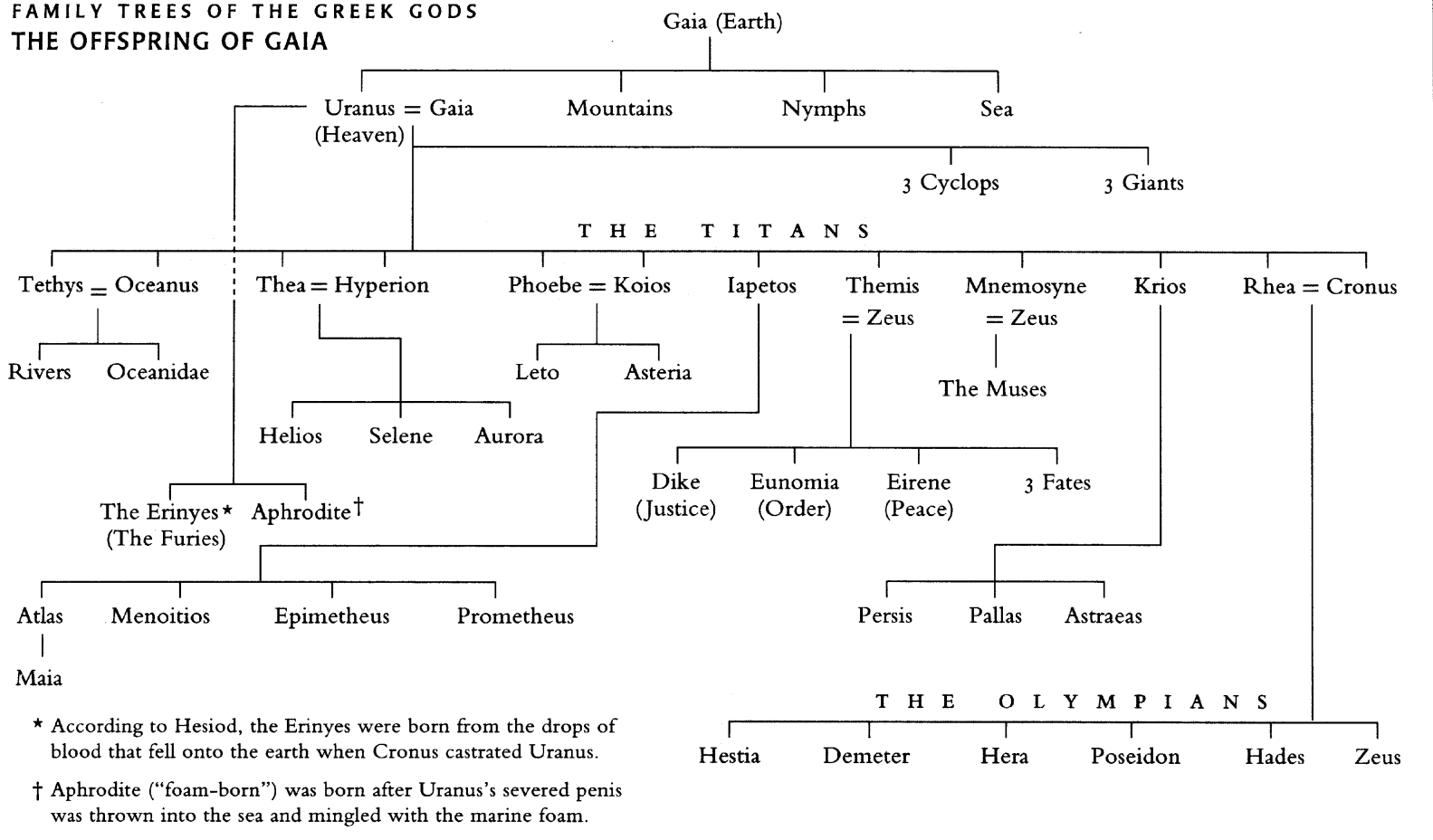
These chthonian powers, who lived in the depths of earth, dominated Greek religion during the dark age. In the ninth century, people believed that it was they, not the Olympians, who ruled the cosmos. As a later poet explained, these dark gods “tracked down the sins of men and gods, and never cease from awful rage until they give the sinner punishment,”⁸ because a single atrocity against one’s kin violated the entire social order. As Uranus, Cronus, and Zeus were all guilty of horrendous family crime, the chthonian gods represented, as it were, the shadow side of the Olympians. Once activated, their power worked automatically and could not be recalled. As soon as a victim cursed his assailant and cried aloud for

vengeance, the Erinyes were released and hounded the transgressor like a pack of wild dogs, until he atoned for his sin by a violent, horrible death.

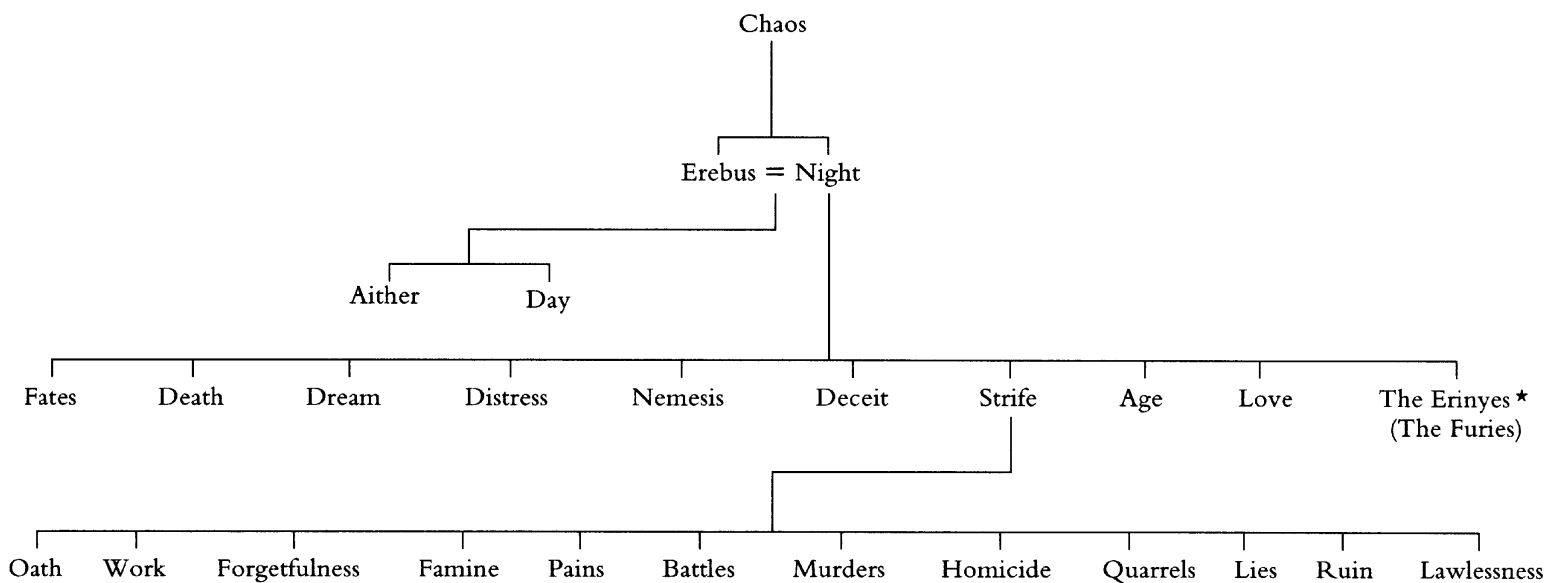
The Erinyes never entirely lost their hold on the Greek imagination. Long after the dark age, Greeks continued to be preoccupied by tales of men and women who murdered their parents and abused their children. These unnatural deeds, even if committed unwittingly, contained a contagious power (*miasma*) that had an independent life of its own. Until it had been purged by the sacrificial death of the wrongdoer, society would be chronically infected by plague and catastrophe. The myth of the house of Atreus, for example, tells of a hideous struggle between two brothers, Atreus and Thyestes, for the throne of Mycenae. On one occasion, Atreus invited his brother to a banquet and served Thyestes a delicious stew, containing the bodies of his own sons. This appalling deed released a contaminating *miasma* that was transmitted to the entire family of Atreus. All were caught up in a monstrous vendetta in which one violent and unnatural crime led to another. Atreus’s son Agamemnon, king of Mycenae, was forced to sacrifice his daughter Iphigenia to secure a favourable wind to take the Greek fleet to Troy. His wife, Clytemnestra, retaliated by murdering him on his return from the Trojan War, and her son Orestes was then obliged to kill her in order to avenge his father. This perverse and convoluted story would become one of the most formative of the Greek myths. Like many other Greek tales, it presents human beings as utterly impotent. In the eighth century, Homer clearly believed that Clytemnestra and Orestes had no choice but to behave as they did; their actions were even lauded as virtuous, because they had rid the earth of the defiling *miasma*.⁹

However powerful they became, the Greeks never truly felt that they were in charge of their fate. As late as the fifth century, when Greek civilization was at its peak, they still believed that people were compelled by the Fates, or even by the Olympian gods, to act as they did, and once a crime had been committed, it inflicted untold woes upon innocent human beings who simply happened to live in the polluted environment. People could expect no help from the Olympians, who intervened in human life irresponsibly, supporting their favourites and destroying those who incurred their wrath, with no heed for the consequences. The only gods who showed any ethical sense were the Erinyes, who were outraged by these violent deeds but completely lacking in pity and compassion. Hence in some versions of the story, having been constrained to kill his mother, Orestes was pursued through the world by the Erinyes, until the *miasma* unleashed by his doomed family had been eliminated.

FAMILY TREES OF THE GREEK GODS
THE OFFSPRING OF GAIA



FAMILY TREES OF THE GREEK GODS
THE OFFSPRING OF CHAOS



* According to Aeschylus, the Erinyes were the three daughters of Night; Hesiod claimed that they were the result of Uranus's castration.

The Greeks were haunted by images of violence and disaster. The Olympians were not merely cruel to human beings; they could also persecute and maim one another. Hera, wife of Zeus, for example, was so disgusted by her crippled son, Hephaestus, when he was born that she flung him down to the earth. A savage, angry deity, she relentlessly hounded the children born of her husband's illicit amours. She plotted with the Titans to kill Dionysus, son of Zeus by the mortal woman Semele, and eventually made him insane. For years Dionysus ran frenziedly through the countries of the east, before he finally found healing. Hera also tried to kill Heracles, another son of Zeus, by putting snakes into his cradle, and drove him mad too, so that he killed his wife and children. The family was the foundation of society. In other cultures, as we shall see, it was regarded as a sacred institution, where people learned the values of respect and reverence for others. In Greece it was a lethal battleground, and Hera, goddess of marriage, showed that the most basic relationships could inspire murderous, cruel emotions. Her cult was pervaded by guilt, terror, and profound anxiety.

The first Greek temple to be built after the dark age was Hera's temple on the island of Samos, off the coast of Asia Minor. Her cult there showed that she was an uncanny, unreliable goddess who could disappear at a moment's notice and take all the good things of life with her. On the eve of her festival each year, her effigy—a shapeless plank—mysteriously vanished from the shrine. Its loss was discovered at daybreak, and all the people of Samos turned out to search for her. When they found the cult image, they purified it, and tied it up with willow twigs to prevent her escaping again—but she always did. Hera was the mother of life, the origin of all that existed. Her disappearance threatened the whole natural order.

The Greeks probably took the disturbing myth of the disappearing deity from the Middle East, and it would inspire some of their most important rituals. These rites taught them that it was impossible to achieve life and ecstasy unless you had experienced the depths of loss. Demeter, divine patron of grain and fertility, was another Mother Goddess who vanished from view. She had borne Zeus a beautiful daughter, called Persephone. Zeus betrothed Persephone to his brother Hades, lord of the underworld, even though he knew that Demeter would never agree to the match, and helped him to abduct the girl. Distraught with rage and grief, Demeter left Olympus, withdrew all her benefits from humanity, and lived on earth, disguised as an old lady, looking everywhere for her daughter.

The world became a barren desert. No corn could grow, and people began to starve to death, so the Olympians, who depended upon the sacrifices of mortals, arranged for Persephone's return. But because she had eaten some pomegranate seeds in the underworld, she had to spend part of each year there with her husband. When she was reunited with Demeter, the world burst into flower, but while she was underground during the winter months, the earth seemed dead. Life and death were inextricably entwined. Demeter was goddess of grain, but also a chthonian goddess, because corn grew from the depths of the earth. Hades, lord of death, was thus also the guardian and bestower of grain, and Persephone, the eternally young girl (*kore*), was mistress of the underworld.

Each year during the ancient festival of Thesmophoria, the Greeks reenacted this disturbing drama.¹⁰ For three days, all the married women of the community left their husbands and disappeared like Demeter. They fasted and slept on the ground, as primitive people had done before the advent of civilization. They ceremonially cursed their menfolk, and there are hints of some form of ritual obscenity. In memory of the pigs that were swallowed up by the earth when Hades abducted Persephone, the women sacrificed piglets, threw their bodies into a pit, and left them to rot. There was no happy ending: the women did not celebrate the return of Persephone. The city had been turned upside down; family life, on which society depended, was disrupted; and the Greeks were forced to contemplate the prospect of the destruction of civilization, the profound antipathy of the sexes, and the cosmic catastrophe that had threatened the world when Demeter withdrew her favour.¹¹ At the end of the festival, the women went home, and life returned to normal. But the cult had made Greeks confront the unspeakable. They had watched their society collapse during the dark age, though they seem to have repressed the memory of this calamity. But some buried recollection of that time made them aware that whatever they achieved could vanish in a trice, and that death, dissolution, and hostility were perpetual, lurking menaces. The ritual compelled the Greeks to live through their fear, and to face it, and then showed them that it was possible to come through safely to the other side.

The religious traditions created during the Axial Age in all four regions were rooted in fear and pain. They would all insist that it was essential not to deny this suffering; indeed, to acknowledge it fully was an essential prerequisite for enlightenment. Even at this early stage, long before their Axial Age had begun, the Greeks already understood the importance of this. It was clear in the festival in honour of Dionysus, god

of wine, which was held in the spring month of Anthesterion at the time of the new vintage.¹² Dionysus had learned the mystery of viticulture in the east, and—legend had it—revealed it to the people of Athens. The strange rites of the Anthesteria festival, which probably dates back to the dark age, reenacted this story and celebrated the divinely transforming power of wine, which lifted people to another dimension, so that, for a short time, they seemed to share in the beatitude of the Olympian gods.

The sampling of the new wine should have been a joyful occasion, but it was a festival of death. The mythical narrative associated with the ritual explained that Dionysus had presented the first vine to Ikarios, a farmer of Attica, and shown him how to harvest the grapes. But when his friends tasted the wine, the alcohol went straight to their heads and they fell to the ground in a stupor. Because they had never seen drunkenness before, the villagers assumed that Ikarios had killed them. They clubbed him to death and Ikarios's blood mingled with the liquor. As a tragic coda, when his daughter Erigone found his broken body, she hanged herself. Only the Greeks could have transformed a joyous spring festival into a memorial of such gratuitous horror.

The festival began at sunset in a small temple of Dionysus in the marshes outside the city. The whole population of Attica, including slaves, women, and children, marched out together to attend the opening ceremony, when a libation of wine was poured out as a gift to the god. But the next day, all the temples were closed and the doors of the houses were daubed with pitch. Everybody stayed at home, and each family member had to drink at least two litres of wine. It was a sombre, deadly drinking competition. There was no merriment, no singing, and no conversation—a complete reversal of an ordinary social occasion in Athens. Each drinker sat alone, at his own table, drinking from a separate jug in sepulchral silence. Why? Local legend claimed that while he was fleeing from the Erinyes, Orestes had arrived in Athens. The king had feared the *miasma* he carried with him but had not wanted to turn him away. He invited Orestes to share the new wine but made him sit by himself, and nobody had spoken to him. Yet despite these precautions, the city had been polluted, and henceforth shared in the blood guilt of Orestes' crime. So, conscious of their impurity, the Athenians drank in grim silence. Suddenly the eerie quiet was interrupted by a grotesque masquerade. Masked mummers, representing the Keres, the chthonian Death Spirits, burst into the streets, riding on wagons that were crammed with pots of wine, aggressively demanding hospitality, laughing raucously, yelling insults, and mak-

ing wild threats. But in the evening, order was restored. The whole population reeled drunkenly back to the little temple in the marshes, singing and laughing, and carrying their empty jugs. A priestess was presented to Dionysus as a bride, the god was placated, and the mummers, the envoys of death, were driven away.

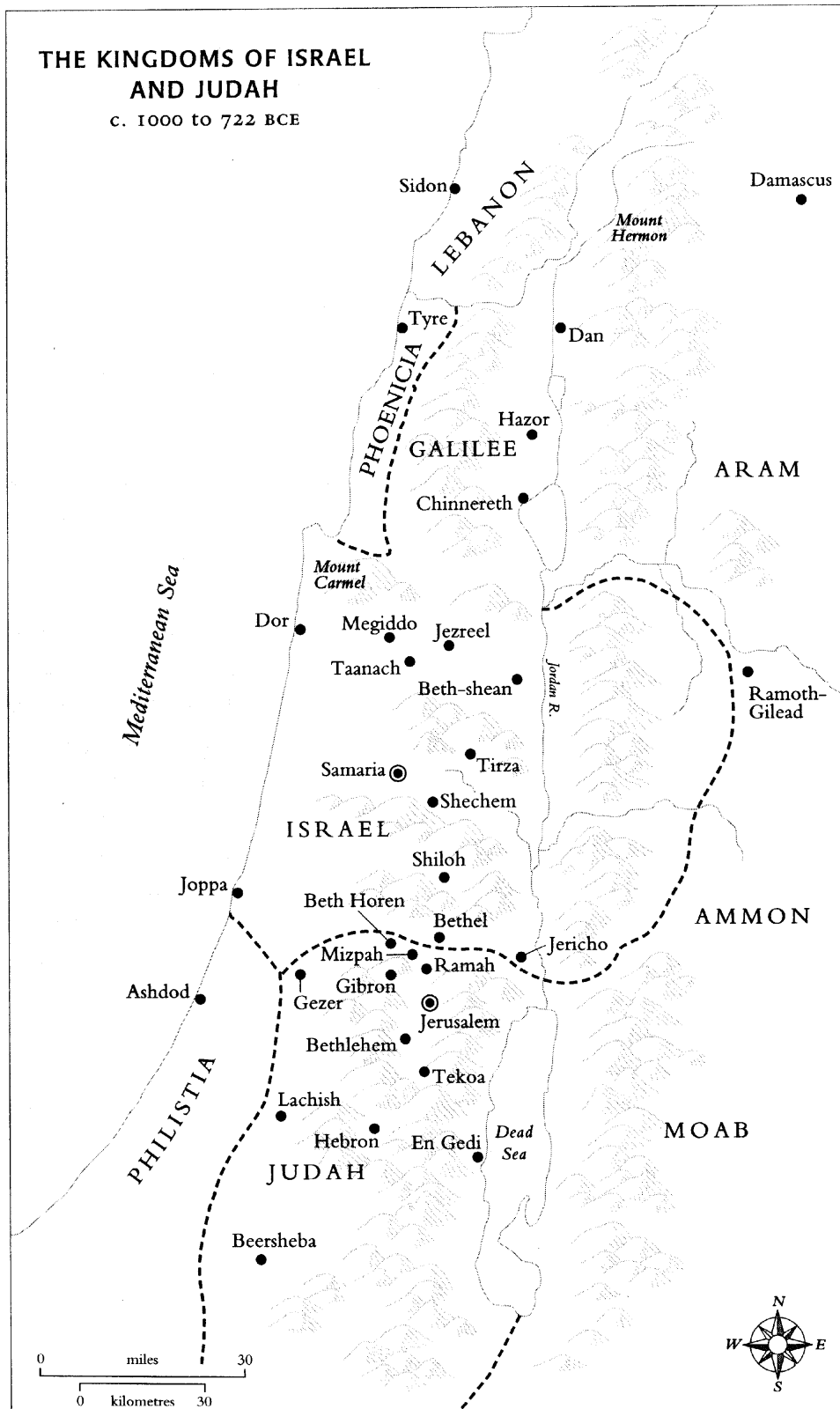
The third day inaugurated another year and a fresh start. There was a lighter, more ebullient atmosphere. To mark the new era, everybody ate a cereal dish that—it was said—the first farmers had eaten in primordial times, before the invention of milling and baking. There were competitions, including a special swinging competition for little girls. But horror lurked even here, because the swinging girls recalled the hanging body of poor Erigone. You could never forget the inherent tragedy of life. All Greek ritual ended in *katharsis* (“purification”). The god was appeased, the *miasma* dispersed, and there was new life, new hope. Even the memory of Erigone's tragic death was combined with the spectacle of laughing, excited children at the beginning of their lives. The participants had experienced an *ekstasis*, a “stepping out.” For three days, they had been able to stand aside from their normal existence, confront their buried fears, and pass through them to renewed life.

There was no introspection, and no attempt to analyse the hidden trauma that haunted the Greek psyche. This was touched upon only indirectly by the external rituals. By reenacting the ancient myth, the participants were not behaving as individuals. They laid aside their ordinary selves and did the opposite of what came naturally. Greeks loved banquets and jollity, but for a whole day they had denied their usual inclinations, and drunk their wine in sorrowful silence. By imitating the drama of the past, they had left their individual selves behind and felt touched and transformed by Dionysus, who was present in the intoxicating wine. The ritual had been an initiation, a rite of passage through sorrow, through the fear of death and pollution, to renewed life. When they came to die, some might remember the Anthesteria, and see death as just another initiation.

The eastern Mediterranean was coming to life again. By the end of the ninth century, the northern kingdom of Israel had become a major power in the region. When the Egyptian pharaoh Shishak had invaded Canaan in 926, he had not only sacked Jerusalem and devastated 150 towns in Israel

THE KINGDOMS OF ISRAEL AND JUDAH

c. 1000 to 722 BCE



and Judah, but had also destroyed the ancient Canaanite strongholds of Megiddo, Rehob, Beth-shean, and Taanach. Canaanite culture never recovered. Israel expanded into the old Canaanite territories, absorbed the inhabitants of the ruined cities, and exploited their skills.¹³ King Omri (885–874) built a marvellous new capital in Samaria, with a large, five-acre royal acropolis. His son Ahab (874–853) built a magnificent ivory palace there and established trade links with Phoenicia, Cyprus, and Greece. He also married Jezebel, a Phoenician princess, whose name has become a byword for wickedness.

The biblical historian who wrote a very negative account of Ahab in the first book of Kings was appalled by Jezebel, because she had imported the cult of Phoenician Baal into Israel. But he was writing in the seventh century, in a very different world. In the ninth century, Ahab's marriage would have been considered a political coup. It was important for the kingdom of Israel to integrate with the region, and hold its own against Damascus, Phoenicia, and Moab. Ahab was doing nothing new. Solomon had also made diplomatic marriages with foreign princesses, had included their gods in the royal cult, and built temples for them in the hills outside Jerusalem.¹⁴ But Ahab had the misfortune to inspire the wrath of a small but passionately committed minority, who believed that the people of Israel should worship Yahweh alone.

Ahab was not an apostate. He regularly consulted the prophets of Yahweh and saw nothing amiss in his wife's devotion to Baal. For centuries, Yahweh's cult had been nourished by the hymns and rites of Baal. As archaeologists have discovered, most of the population worshipped other local gods besides Yahweh, and Baal worship flourished in Israel until the sixth century.¹⁵ But by the ninth century, some Israelites were beginning to cut down on the number of gods they worshipped. In Syria and Mesopotamia, the experience of the divine was too complex and overwhelming to be confined to a single symbol. The imagery of the divine assembly, with its carefully graded ranks of consorts, divine children, and servants, showed that divinity was multifaceted and yet formed a coherent unity.¹⁶ The symbolism of the divine assembly was very important to the people of Israel and Judah, but by the ninth century it was becoming more streamlined. Instead of presiding over a large divine household, like El and his consort, Asherah, Yahweh presided alone over a host of lesser celestial beings.¹⁷ They were his "heavenly host," the warriors in his divine army.

As the national God, Yahweh had no peers, no rivals, and no superiors. He was surrounded by an "assembly of the holy ones" and "sons of God," who all applauded his fidelity to his people:

*Yahweh, the assembly of holy ones in heaven
 Applaud the marvel of your faithfulness.
 Who in the skies can compare with Yahweh?
 Which of the sons of God can rival him?*

*God, dreaded in the great assembly of holy ones,
 Terrible to all around him,
 Yahweh, God of armies, who is like you?
 Mighty Yahweh, clothed in your faithfulness!¹⁸*

When people cried, “Who is like Yahweh among the other gods?” they were obviously not denying the existence of other deities, but declaring that their patronal god was more effective than the other “sons of El,” the national gods of their neighbours. None could rival Yahweh’s faithfulness.¹⁹ But Yahweh was a warrior god. He had no expertise in agriculture or fertility, and so many Israelites, as a matter of course, performed the ancient rituals of Baal and Anat to ensure a good harvest, because Baal was the power that fertilized the land.

A small group of prophets, however, wanted to worship Yahweh alone, and were convinced that he could provide for all the wants of his people. Prophecy was an established spirituality of the ancient Middle East. From Canaan to Mari in the middle Euphrates, ecstatic prophets “spoke for” their gods.* In Israel and Judah, prophets were usually associated with the royal court. The biblical sources indicate that they often criticized the monarch, and were concerned to preserve the purity of Yahweh’s cult. We know very little about early Israelite prophecy, however, because our main source is the seventh-century biblical historian who was writing long after the events he describes. But the legends about the ninth-century prophet Elijah and his disciple, Elisha, in the first and second books of Kings bear the marks of older, oral tradition. The material is not entirely historical, but these stories may reflect the very early stirrings of what scholars call the “Yahweh alone movement.”

These tales describe the bitter clash between Elijah and Ahab. They present Jezebel as an evil woman who supported the priests of Baal but persecuted the prophets of Yahweh.²⁰ Elijah’s name means “Yahweh is my God!” He is the first prophet on record to insist on the exclusive worship of Yahweh. In the old Middle Eastern theology, El had appointed a god to

*A prophet is not a person who foretells the future. The word comes from the Greek *prophetes*, one who speaks on behalf of the deity.

each of the nations. Yahweh was the holy one of Israel; Chemosh the holy one of Moab; and Milkom the holy one of Ammon. But some prophets were beginning to feel that Yahweh would be undermined if a king imported a foreign deity into the royal cult, and favoured him over the holy one of Israel. Elijah did not doubt the existence of Baal, but because he was not the god of Israel, Elijah believed that he should stay in Phoenicia.

When, despite Baal’s patronage, Israel was afflicted by a severe drought, Elijah saw his opportunity, and challenged 450 of Jezebel’s priests to a contest on Mount Carmel.²¹ First he harangued the people who had come to watch. It was time that they made a choice between Yahweh and Baal, once and for all. Next he called for two bulls—one for Yahweh and the other for Baal—to be placed on two altars. He and the Baal priests would call upon their respective gods and see which one sent down fire to consume the victim. For a whole morning, the Baal priests shouted Baal’s name, yelling and gashing themselves with swords and spears and performing a hobbling dance around their altar. Nothing happened. But the second Elijah called on Yahweh, fire fell from heaven and devoured both bull and altar. The people fell on their faces: Yahweh was their god! Elijah ordered all the prophets of Baal to be slaughtered in a nearby valley and then climbed up Mount Carmel and sat with his head between his knees, deep in prayer, begging Yahweh to end the drought. The rain fell in torrents, and Elijah tucked his hairy cloak into his leather loincloth and ran in ecstasy beside Ahab’s chariot. Yahweh had successfully usurped the function of Baal, proving that he was as effective at maintaining the fertility of the land as at war.

In proposing that Israel worship only one god, Elijah had introduced a new tension into its traditional religion. Ignoring Baal required the people to relinquish an important and valuable divine resource. Thousands of them had found that the cult of Baal had enhanced their understanding of the world, had made their fields fertile, and given meaning to the back-breaking struggle against sterility and famine. When they performed the rites, they believed that they were tapping into the sacred energies that made the earth productive. Elijah was asking Israelites to give all that up and put their entire faith in Yahweh, who had no reputation in the field of fertility.²²

After the storm, Elijah fell into depression and feared for his life, convinced that Jezebel would avenge the massacre of her prophets. He left Israel and took sanctuary in Yahweh’s shrine on Mount Sinai, which the people of the northern kingdom called Mount Horeb. There Elijah hid in a cleft of the rock and waited for a revelation.²³ In the past, like Baal, the

divine warrior Yahweh had often revealed himself in the convulsions of nature. The mountains had shaken, the trees had writhed, and the rivers had quailed at his approach. But this time it was different:

Then Yahweh himself went by. There came a mighty wind, so strong it tore the mountains and shattered the rocks before Yahweh. But Yahweh was no longer in the wind. After the wind came an earthquake. But Yahweh was no longer in the earthquake. After the earthquake came a fire. But Yahweh was no longer in the fire. And after the fire there came the sound of a gentle breeze. And when Elijah heard this, he covered his face with his cloak.²⁴

This was a hidden deity, no longer manifest in the violent forces of nature, but in a thin whisper of sound, the scarcely perceptible timbre of a tiny breeze, and in the paradox of a voiced silence.

It was a transcendent moment. Instead of revealing the divine as immanent in the natural world, Yahweh had become separate and other. Historians often speak of the “transcendental breakthrough” of the Axial Age. This was clearly such an event, but like the ancient religion of Israel, it was also deeply agonistic. It followed hard upon the heels of a massacre, and preceded a new round of hostilities. Standing outside the cave, covered in his cloak, Elijah heard Yahweh sentence Ahab’s successors to death. They would all die, saving only those “who have not knelt before Baal.”²⁵ When people concentrated on defining the god that they were transcending *to*, instead of focusing on the greed, hatred, and egotism that they were transcending *from*, there was a danger of stridency and aggressive chauvinism. Freedom was an essential value of the Axial Age, and Elijah’s strong-arm tactics were what some later Axial sages would call “unskillful.” It was counterproductive to force people into a spirituality for which they were not ready. It was unhelpful to be dogmatic about a transcendence that was essentially indefinable.

Elijah’s contest with the prophets of Baal marked the beginning of a new conflict in Israel and Judah. From this time forward, the bitter contest with rival deities would inform the spirituality of the prophets. In some respects the cult became more peaceful. The ancient imagery of the divine warrior fell out of favour, because it was too reminiscent of Baal. Instead of seeing Yahweh in a dramatic storm, prophets henceforth had visions of Yahweh in the divine assembly.²⁶ But even this became competitive and agonistic. This Hebrew psalm shows Yahweh fighting for preeminence against the other sons of God in the council:

*Yahweh stands up in the divine assembly,
Among the gods he dispenses justice:*

*“No more mockery of justice,
No more favouring the wicked!
Let the weak and the orphan have justice,
Be fair to the wretched and the destitute;
Rescue the weak and needy,
Save them from the clutches of the wicked!”*

*Ignorant and senseless, they carry on blindly,
Undermining the very basis of earthly society.
I once said, “You too are gods,
Sons of the Most High, all of you,”
But all the same, you shall die like other men;
As one man, gods, you shall fall.*

*Rise, Yahweh, dispense justice throughout the world,
Since no nation is excluded from your ownership.²⁷*

In the old days, the psalm implies, Yahweh had been prepared to accept the other “sons of God” as *elohim*, but now they are obsolete; they would wither away like mortal men. Yahweh, who had won the leadership of the divine council, had sentenced them all to death.

Yahweh accused the other deities of neglecting the primal duty of social justice. Elijah also insisted on compassion and consideration for the poor and oppressed. When Jezebel had Naboth, a landowner in the Jezreel Valley, stoned to death simply because he had refused to hand over a vineyard that adjoined Ahab’s property, Yahweh sentenced the king to a horrible end: “In the place where the dogs licked the blood of Naboth, the dogs will lick your blood too.”²⁸ When he heard this oracle, Ahab was overcome with remorse; he fasted, slept in sackcloth, and Yahweh relented. Concern for social justice was not a new development, nor was it peculiar to Israel and Judah. The protection of the weak had long been common policy throughout the ancient Near East.²⁹ As early as the third millennium, the kings of Mesopotamia had insisted that justice for the poor, the orphan, and the widow was a sacred duty, decreed by the sun god Shamash, who listened to their cries for help. The prologue of the Code of Hammurabi (1728–1686) decreed that the sun would shine over the people only if the king and the mighty did not oppress their vulner-

able subjects. The kings of Egypt were also commanded to take care of the destitute,³⁰ because Re, the sun god, was the “vizier of the poor.”³¹ In Ugarit, famine and drought could be held at bay only if justice and equity prevailed in the land; the protection of the weak preserved the divine order, achieved by Baal in his battle with Mot.³² Throughout the Middle East, justice was an essential pillar of religion. It was also good pragmatic policy. There was no point in conquering foreign and cosmic foes if your iniquitous social policies created enemies at home.

Elijah and Elisha were both remembered for their acts of practical kindness as well as for their fiery words. These stories are given just as much prominence as Elijah’s battles with Baal.³³ Like the other gods of the Middle East, Yahweh was moved by the plight of the needy and rewarded practical compassion as much as cultic purity. When a poor woman of Sidon shared her last handful of meal and oil with Elijah during a drought, Yahweh promised to keep her supplied with food for as long as the famine lasted.³⁴ But these tales do not indicate the beginning of a new Axial Age spirituality; social justice was already deeply rooted in the ancient traditions of the region.

To the east of Israel, an entirely different kind of empire was slowly coming into being. In 876, the Assyrian king had subdued the Phoenician towns on the Mediterranean coast, and when Shalmaneser III came to the throne in 859, a powerful confederation of local kings, led by Hadadezer of Damascus, tried to block Assyria’s western advance. Ahab contributed a chariot squadron to the army that marched against Assyria in 853 and was defeated at the battle of Qarqar on the river Orontes. Assyria was not yet strong enough to annex territory in the west, however, and Damascus remained the strongest state in the area. Later that year, Ahab tried to challenge its power but died in a battle against his former ally. That was the end of the house of Omri; in a palace coup, Jehu, a candidate supported by Elisha, seized the throne and made an alliance with Assyria. In 841, Assyria defeated Damascus and became master of the region. As a favoured vassal, the kingdom of Israel enjoyed a new period of peace and prosperity.

The story of the covenant ceremony at Shechem, recounted in the twenty-fourth chapter of the book of Joshua, probably dates from this period.³⁵ It is an older text, which the seventh-century historian included in his chronicle, and was probably based on the ancient covenant festival celebrated at this shrine. When the Israelites first arrived in Canaan, we are told, Joshua bound them solemnly to Yahweh in a formal treaty. If they wished to become Yahweh’s people, they must put away the gods they had worshipped on the other side of the Jordan River, and serve Yahweh alone.

They had to choose between Yahweh and the other gods of the region. Joshua warned them that this was a serious decision. Yahweh was a “jealous god, who will not forgive transgressions. . . . If you desert Yahweh to follow alien gods, he in turn will afflict and destroy you.” But the people were adamant. Yahweh was their *elohim*. “Then cast away the alien gods among you,” Joshua cried, “and give your hearts to Yahweh, the God of Israel.”³⁶

In the late ninth century, other gods were still alluring, but they had to stay on the opposite side of the Jordan. This was not a monotheistic text. If no other gods existed, it would be unnecessary for the people to make such a choice.³⁷ Monolatry (the worship of a single god) was a liturgical arrangement. The “Yahweh alone” movement urged Israelites to offer sacrifice only to Yahweh and to ignore the cult of other deities. But this position required courage, a narrowing of divine resources, and a loss of familiar and beloved sanctities. Israel was about to embark on a lonely, painful journey of severance from the mythical and cultic consensus of the Middle East.

No such painful rupture was required of the Chinese, whose Axial Age would not break with the past but would develop from a deeper understanding of the ancient rituals practised by the Zhou kings. The ninth century was a time of great weakness in China. The old feudal system was disintegrating and the Zhou domain was under constant attack from the barbarian peoples in the surrounding lands. We know very little about the historical events of this period, but there are sporadic references to palace intrigues, which, on at least two occasions, forced the king to flee his capital. The king could exert little control over the cities of the central plain, and the old monarchy had in effect been replaced by a confederation of lords united by their ideological loyalty to the Zhou, but in practice operating independently.³⁸ The only thing that held them all together was the cult. The rites reminded the king’s vassals that the monarch was the Tianzi, the “son of Heaven.” He had received a mandate from Tian Shang Di, Heaven Most High, to rule the Chinese people. He alone was permitted to sacrifice to the High God, and Zhouzhuang, his capital in the Wei Valley, was the religious centre of the entire network of Zhou cities. No other city was allowed to hold the prestigious royal rites in honour of the deceased kings of China except Lu, whose prince was a direct descendant of the duke of Zhou.

