6

EMPATHY

(c. 530 to 450 BCE)

Towards the end of the sixth century, Lu was on the verge of total anarchy, as the three baronial families who had usurped the power of the legitimate duke battled against one another for supremacy. This was especially distressing to the ritualists. People from all over China came to Lu to attend the ceremonial liturgy and listen to the music that dated back to the early Zhou kings. One visitor from Jin exclaimed: "The ceremony [*li*] of Zhou is all in all here! Only now do I understand the potency of the Duke of Zhou and why Zhou reigned."[1] But by 518, the rightful ruler of Lu, the descendant of the duke of Zhou, was so poor that he could no longer pay musicians and dancers to perform these rites in the ancestral temple. Yet that year one of the usurpers had eight teams of dancers performing the rites of the royal house—quite illegally—in his *own* ancestral shrine. There was creeping dismay. The *li* no longer curbed the greed and ostentation of the noble families, and Heaven seemed indifferent.

When Confucius heard about this illicit performance of the royal rites, he was incensed. "The Way makes no progress," he lamented.[2] If the rulers could not implement the sacred values that kept society on the right path, then he must do so himself. As a commoner, he could not establish the *dao;* only a king could do that. But he could educate a band of holy, informed men who would instruct the rulers of China in the Way and recall them to their duty. Confucius had hoped for a political career, but was constantly disappointed. He was too blunt and honest to succeed in politics, and never managed to achieve anything more than a menial appointment in the departments of finance and accountancy. Yet this was the best thing that could have happened. His political failure gave him time to think, and he became an inspired teacher, determined that if he could not succeed himself, he would train others for high office. Like other marginalized *shi* at this time, he became a wandering scholar, travelling tirelessly from one state to another with his small, faithful band of disciples, hoping that at least one of the princes would finally take him seriously.

Confucius was no solitary ascetic, but a man of the world, who enjoyed a good dinner, fine wine, a song, a joke, and stimulating conversation. He did not lock himself away in an ivory tower, did not practise introspection or meditation, but always developed his insights in conversation with other people. In the Analects, our main source, we see him constantly engaged in discussion with friends and pupils. His kindness and brilliance—an unusual combination—drew students towards him like a magnet, and he never turned anyone away. Some of his students were aristocrats, others were of humble birth. His favourite was probably the poor but mystically gifted Yan Hui, but he loved all the members of his little company: calm, strong Mingzi; energetic Zilu; and Zigong, who was always so brave and honest. When a potential student presented himself, Confucius looked for one quality above all others. "Only one who bursts with eagerness do I instruct," he said. "Only one who bubbles with excitement do I enlighten."[3] He scolded his pupils, drove them on ruthlessly, but never bullied them. After marvelling at the somewhat daunting attainments of the yogins, it is a relief to turn to Confucius, whose Way, properly understood, was accessible to anybody. Affable, calm, and friendly, Confucius never pontificated; there were no long lectures or sermons, and even if he disagreed with his students, he was usually ready to concede their point of view. Why should he not? He was no divinely inspired sage like Yao or Shun. He had no revelations or visions. His only merit was an "unwearying effort to learn and unflagging patience in teaching others."[4]

The Analects were put together by his disciples long after Confucius's death, so we cannot be sure that all the maxims attributed to him are authentic, but scholars believe that the text can be regarded as a reasonably reliable source.[5] It consists of hundreds of short, unconnected remarks, with no attempt to produce a clearly defined vision. The style is suggestive in the same way as a Chinese landscape: readers are supposed to search for what is *not* said, to look between the lines for the full meaning, and to connect one idea with another. In fact, despite first impressions, there is coherence in the Analects. Indeed, Confucius's vision is so densely interconnected that it is sometimes difficult to disentangle its various themes.

Like other philosophers of the Axial Age, Confucius felt profoundly alienated from his time. He was convinced that the root cause of the current disorder in China was neglect of the traditional rites that had governed the conduct of the principalities for so long. In the days of Yao and

Shun and, later, under the early Zhou, he believed, the Way of Heaven had been practised perfectly and human beings had lived together harmoniously. The *li* had encouraged a spirit of moderation and generosity. But these days, most princes never gave the *dao* a second thought. They were too busy chasing after luxury and pursuing their own selfish ambitions. The old world was crumbling, without anything of equal value emerging to take its place. In Confucius's view, the best solution was to return to the traditions that had worked so well in the past.

Confucius was horrified by the constant warfare that threatened to obliterate the small principalities. Yet, to his dismay, they did not seem fully alert to the danger. Lu could not compete militarily with a large state like Qi, but instead of marshalling all its resources to meet this external threat, the baronial families—all motivated by greed and vainglory—were fighting a self-destructive civil war. If the "three families" had observed the *li* correctly, this state of affairs could never have come to pass. In the past, the rites had helped to curb the danger of violence and vendetta, and had mitigated the horror of battle. They must do so again. As a ritualist, Confucius had spent far more time on the study of ceremony and the classics than on the princely arts of archery and chariot driving.[6] He now redefined the role of the *junzi:* the true gentleman should be a scholar, not a warrior. Instead of fighting for power, the *junzi* must study the rules of correct behaviour, as prescribed by the traditional *li* of family, political, military, and social life. Confucius never claimed to be an original thinker. "I have transmitted what was taught to me without making up anything of my own," he once said. "I have been faithful to and loved the ancients."[7] Only a sage, who had been blessed with divine insight, could break with tradition. "I am simply one who loves the past, and who is diligent in investigating it."[8] And yet, despite these disclaimers, Confucius *was* an innovator. He was bent on "reanimating the Old to gain knowledge of the New."[9] The world had changed, but there could be no fruitful development unless there was also a measure of continuity.

Some of the ways in which Confucius interpreted tradition were radically different in emphasis. The old religion had focused on Heaven: people had often performed the sacrifices simply to gain the favour of the gods and spirits, but Confucius concentrated on this world. Like his contemporary Zichan, prime minister of Cheng, he believed that it was better to focus on what we knew. Indeed, he preferred not to speak of Heaven at all. His pupil Zigong noted: "We are allowed to hear our Master's views on culture and the outward insignia of goodness, but about the ways of Heaven, he will not tell us anything at all."[10] Confucius was not interested

in metaphysics and discouraged theological chatter. When Zilu asked him how a *junzi* should minister to the gods, he replied: "Till you have learned to serve men, how can you serve spirits?" And when Zilu persisted, and asked what the life of the ancestors was actually like, Confucius replied again: "Till you know about the living, how are you to know about the dead?"[11] Confucius was no sceptic. He practised the traditional ancestral rites punctiliously, and was filled with numinous awe when he thought of Heaven. Like the Indian sages, he understood the value of silence. "I would much rather not have to talk," he once complained. Zigong was distressed. "If our Master did not talk," he objected, "how can we little ones teach others about him?" "Heaven does not speak," Confucius replied, "yet the four seasons run their course by the command of Heaven, the hundred creatures, each after its own kind, are born thereby. Heaven does no speaking!"[12] Heaven might not talk, but it was supremely effective. Instead of wasting time on pointless theological speculation, people should imitate the reticence of Heaven and keep a reverent silence. Then, perhaps, they too would be a potent force in the world. Confucius brought the religion of China down to earth. Instead of concerning themselves about the afterlife, people must learn to be good here below. His disciples did not study with him in order to acquire esoteric information about the gods and spirits. Their ultimate concern was not Heaven but the Way. The task of the *junzi* was to tread the path carefully, realizing that this in itself had absolute value. It would lead them not to a place or a person but to a condition of transcendent goodness. The rituals were the road map that would put them on course.

Everybody had the potential to become a *junzi,* who—for Confucius—was a fully developed human being. In the old days, only an aristocrat had been a *junzi,* but Confucius insisted that anybody who studied the Way enthusiastically could become a "gentleman," a mature or profound person. Zigong once suggested that the company adopt as their motto: "Poor without cadging, rich without swagger." "Not bad," Confucius said. "But better still, Poor, yet delighting in the Way; rich, yet a student of ritual." Zigong immediately capped this by quoting a verse from the *Classic of Odes:*

> *As thing cut, as thing filed,*
> *As thing chiselled, as thing polished.*[13]

Confucius was delighted: at last Zigong was beginning to understand the *Odes*! These lines perfectly described the way a *junzi* used the rites to bur-

nish and refine his humanity. A *junzi* was not born but crafted. He had to work on himself in the same way as a sculptor shaped a rough stone and made it a thing of beauty. A true *junzi* was always trying to go beyond what he was and become what he was supposed to be. "How can I achieve this?" asked Yan Hui. It was simple, Confucius answered: "Curb your ego and surrender to *li*."[14] A *junzi* must submit every detail of his life to the rituals of consideration and respect for others. The aim was "to look at nothing in defiance of ritual, to listen to nothing in defiance of ritual, to speak of nothing in defiance of ritual, never to stir hand or foot in defiance of ritual." If the princes of China did this, they would save the world. "If a ruler could curb his ego and submit to *li* for a single day, everyone under Heaven would respond to his goodness!"[15]

Like the Indian sages, Confucius saw the "ego principle" as the source of human pettiness and cruelty. If people could lose their selfishness and submit to the altruistic demands of the *li* at every moment of their lives, they would be transformed by the beauty of holiness. They would conform to the archetypal ideal of the *junzi,* the superior human being. The rites lifted ordinary biological actions onto a different plane; they ensured that we did not treat other people carelessly or relate to them perfunctorily; that we were not simply driven by utility and self-interest. The rules of filial piety, for example, instructed sons to serve their parents' food graciously, but these days many sons simply threw it on the table. "Even dogs and horses are cared for to that extent!" Confucius exclaimed in exasperation; but if the meal was eaten in an atmosphere of respect and appreciation, it became humane.[16] A man of the Axial Age, Confucius wanted people to become fully conscious of what they were doing. Performance of the *li* was not simply a matter of going through the motions; it required psychological acuity, sensitivity, and an intelligent appraisal of each circumstance.[17] "Filial piety does not consist merely in young people undertaking the hard work, when anything has to be done or serving their elders first with wine and food," Confucius explained; "it is something much more than that."[18] What was this elusive "something"? It was the "demeanour," Confucius decided.[19] The spirit in which you performed a rite would show in every single one of your gestures and facial expressions. A rite could become an insult if it was carried out with contempt or impatience.

In the past, however, the *li* had often had an aggressive edge. They had been used for political advantage or simply to enhance a nobleman's personal prestige. Confucius systematically took this egotism out of the *li.* His prolonged study of the rites had taught him that they made sense only if

sincerely performed in a spirit of "yielding" (*rang*). Sons had to yield to fathers, warriors to their enemies, and kings to their retainers. The rites taught them to give up their personal preferences, dethroning themselves from the centre of their world and putting another person there. In political life, the rites had made it difficult for statesmen to promote purely self-interested policies. They had taught a disciplined habit of empathy. If performed in the right spirit, therefore, the rites were a spiritual education that helped people to get beyond the limitations of egotism. A reformed ritualism, which cut out the old obsession with status and preeminence, could make the whole of China a humane place, by restoring dignity and grace to human intercourse.

Li taught people to deal with others as equals. They became partners in the same ceremony: in the liturgical ballets, a person who performed even a minor role perfectly was indispensable and contributed to the beauty of the whole. The rites made people conscious of the holiness of life and also conferred sanctity. Traditionally, the *li* of reverence had nourished the divine power of the prince; the *li* of filial piety had created the divine *shen* that enabled a mortal man to become an ancestor. By treating others with absolute respect, the rituals introduced the person who performed the rite and the person who received his attention to the sacred dimension of existence.

In India, the yogins had embarked on a solitary quest for the absolute. Confucius would not have understood this. In his view, you needed other people to elicit your full humanity; self-cultivation was a reciprocal process. Instead of seeing family life as an impediment to enlightenment, like the renouncers of India, Confucius saw it as the theatre of the religious quest, because it taught every family member to live for others.[20] This altruism was essential to the self-cultivation of a *junzi:* "In order to establish oneself, one should try to establish others," Confucius explained. "In order to enlarge oneself, one should try to enlarge others."[21] Later Confucius would be criticized for concentrating too exclusively upon the family—because people should have concern for everybody—but Confucius saw each person as the centre of a constantly growing series of concentric circles, to which he or she must relate.[22] Each of us began life in the family, so the family *li* began our education in self-transcendence, but it could not end there. A *junzi*'s horizons would gradually expand. The lessons he had learned by caring for his parents, spouse, and siblings made his heart larger, so that he felt empathy with more and more people: first with his immediate community, then with the state in which he lived, and finally with the entire world.

Confucius was one of the first people to make it crystal clear that holiness was inseparable from altruism. He used to say: "My Way has one thread that runs right through it." There were no abstruse metaphysics or complicated liturgical speculations; everything always came back to the importance of treating other people with absolute sacred respect. "Our Master's Way," said one of his disciples, "is nothing but this: doing-your-best-for-others [*zhong*] and consideration [*shu*]."[23] The Way was nothing but a dedicated, ceaseless effort to nourish the holiness of others, who in return would bring out the sanctity inherent in you. "Is there any single saying that one can act upon all day and every day?" Zigong asked his master. "Perhaps the saying about consideration [*shu*]," said Confucius. "Never do to others what you would not like them to do to you."[24] *Shu* should really be translated as "likening to oneself." Others have called it the Golden Rule; it was the essential religious practice and was far more difficult than it appeared. Zigong once claimed that he had mastered this virtue: "What I do not want others to do to me, I have no desire to do to others," he announced proudly. One can almost see Confucius's wry but affectionate smile, as he shook his head. "Oh! You have not quite got to that point yet."[25]

Shu required that "all day and every day" we looked into our own hearts, discovered what caused us pain, and then refrained, under all circumstances, from inflicting that distress upon other people. It demanded that people no longer put themselves into a special, separate category but constantly related their own experience to that of others. Confucius was the first to promulgate the Golden Rule. For Confucius it had transcendent value. A perfect mastery of the *li* helped people to acquire what he called *ren*. This word had originally meant "noble" or "worthy," but by Confucius's time, it simply meant a human being. Confucius gave the word an entirely new significance, but he refused to define it. Later some philosophers would equate *ren* with "benevolence," but this was too narrow for Confucius.[26] In Chinese script, *ren* had two components: first, a simple ideogram of a human being—the self; and second, two horizontal strokes, indicating human relations. So *ren* could be translated as "cohumanity"; some scholars also argue that its root meaning was "softness" or "pliability."[27] *Ren* was, therefore, inseparable from the "yielding" of ritual. But for Confucius, *ren* was inexpressible, because it could not be contained within any of the familiar categories of his time.[28] Only somebody who practised *ren* perfectly could understand it. *Ren* resembled what Socrates and Plato would call "the Good." A person who had *ren* had become a perfectly mature human being, on a level with Yao, Shun, or the duke of

Zhou. *Ren,* Confucius believed, was the "power of the Way" (*daode*) that had enabled the sage kings to rule without force. It should no longer be regarded as magical but as a moral efficacy that would change the world far more effectively than violence and warfare.

What is *ren,* asked one of Confucius's disciples, and how could it be applied to political life? The master replied:

> Behave away from home as though you were in the presence of an important guest. Deal with the common people as though you were officiating at an important sacrifice. Do not do to others what you would not like yourself. Then there will be no feelings of opposition to you, whether it is the affairs of a State you are handling or the affairs of a Family.[29]

If the prince behaved towards other rulers and states in this way, there could be no brutal wars. The Golden Rule would make it impossible to invade or devastate somebody else's territory, because no prince would like this to happen to his own state. Rulers could not exploit the common people, because they would see them as copractitioners in a beautiful ceremony and, therefore, "like themselves." Opposition and hatred would melt away. Confucius could not explain what *ren* was, but he could tell people how to acquire it. *Shu* taught you to use your own feelings as a guide to your treatment of others. It was quite simple, Confucius explained to Zigong:

> As for *ren,* you yourself desire rank and standing; then help others to get rank and standing. You want to turn your merits to account; then help others to turn theirs to account—in fact, the ability to take one's own feelings as a guide—that is the sort of thing that lies in the direction of *ren.*[30]

Any ruler who constantly behaved in this way, conferring benefits on the ordinary folk and seeking the good of the entire state rather than his own personal advantage, would be a sage on the same level as Yao and Shun.[31]

Confucius was not a timid conservative, therefore, clinging to traditional mores and preoccupied with liturgical minutiae. His vision was revolutionary. He gave a new interpretation to the customary *li*. They were not designed to enhance a nobleman's prestige, but to transform him by making the practice of self-forgetfulness habitual. By taking the egotism out of the ritual, Confucius brought out its profound spiritual and moral

potential. He was not encouraging servile conformity. The *li* demanded the imagination and intelligence to see that each circumstance was unique and must be judged independently. Confucius also introduced a new egalitarianism. Previously only the aristocracy had performed the *li.* Now, Confucius insisted, anybody could practise the rites, and even somebody of humble origins, such as Yan Hui, could become a *junzi.*

Other Chinese philosophers of the Axial Age would propose a more realistic solution to the problems of China, but they were not always as ambitious as Confucius, who aimed at more than law and order. He wanted human dignity, nobility, and holiness, and knew that this could be achieved only by a daily struggle to achieve the virtue of *shu.* It was an audacious plan. Confucius was asking people to trust in the power of an enhanced humanity instead of coercion. Very few people really wanted to give up their egotism. But those who did try to put Confucius's Way into practice found that it transformed their lives. *Ren* was difficult because it required the eradication of vanity, resentment, and the desire to dominate others.[32] And yet, paradoxically, *ren* was easy. "Is *ren* indeed so far away?" Confucius asked. "If we really wanted *ren,* we should find that it was at our very side."[33] It came "after what is difficult is done"—after, that is, a person had mastered the education provided by the *li.*[34] It required perseverance, rather than superhuman strength, and was, perhaps, like learning to ride a bicycle: once you had acquired the skill, it became effortless. You had to keep at it, however. Either you constantly behaved towards other people—whoever they were—as though they had the same fundamental importance as yourself, or you did not. But if you did so, you achieved a moral power that was almost tangible.

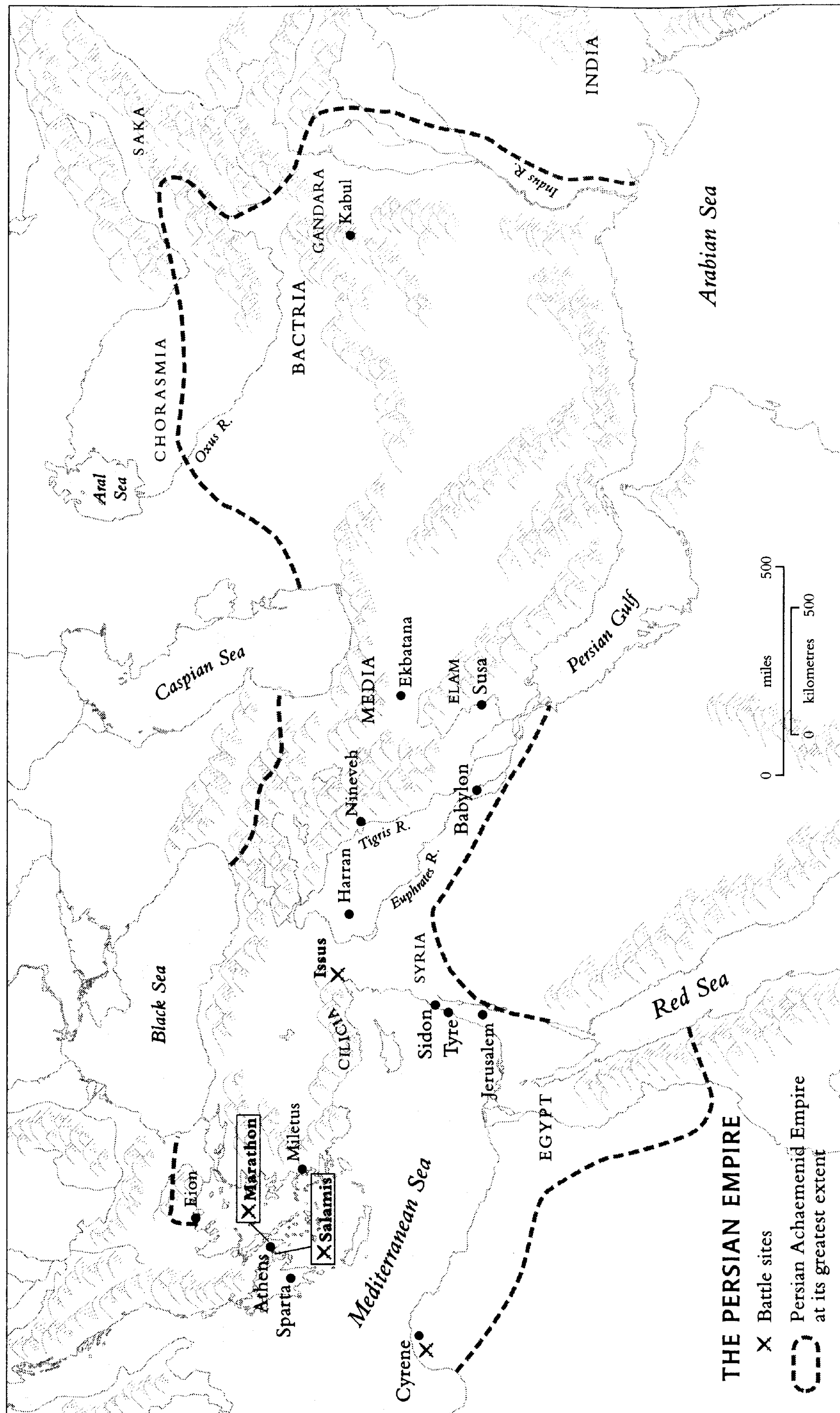
The pursuit of *ren* was a lifelong struggle; it would end only at death.[35] Confucius did not encourage his students to speculate about what lay at the end of the Way. Walking along this path was itself a transcendent and dynamic experience. Yan Hui, Confucius's favourite disciple, expressed it beautifully when he said of *ren,* "with a deep sigh":

> The more I strain my gaze towards it the higher it soars. The deeper I bore down into it, the harder it becomes. I see it in front, but suddenly it is behind. Step by step, the Master skilfully lures one on. He has broadened me with culture, restrained me with ritual. Even if I wanted to stop, I could not. Just when I feel that I have exhausted every resource, something seems to rise up, standing over me sharp and clear. Yet though I long to pursue it, I can find no way of getting to it at all.[36]

Ren was not something you "got" but something you gave. *Ren* was an exacting yet exhilarating way of life. It was *itself* the transcendence you sought. Living a compassionate, empathic life took you beyond yourself, and introduced you into another dimension. The constant discipline of ritual and *ren* gave Yan Hui momentary glimpses of a sacred reality that was both immanent and transcendent, looming up from within yet also a companionable presence, "standing over me sharp and clear."

When Yan Hui died, in 483, Confucius wept bitterly, without his customary restraint. "Alas, Heaven has bereft me, Heaven has bereft me!"[37] If any man's death could justify such excessive grief, he said, it was Yan Hui's. He had always said that Yan Hui was further along the Way than himself.[38] Confucius's son died that same year, and three years later, his oldest disciple, Zilu, died. Confucius was desolate. "The phoenix does not come," he lamented, "the river gives forth no chart. It is all over with me."[39] Even his hero the duke of Zhou no longer came to him in sleep.[40] In 479 he died at the age of seventy-four. In his self-effacing way, he thought that he was a failure, and yet he had made an indelible impression on Chinese spirituality. Even the Axial philosophers who vehemently rejected his teaching would find it impossible to escape his influence.

A new power had appeared in the Middle East. In 559, Cyrus succeeded to the throne of Persia, in what is now southern Iran. Ten years later, he conquered Media; in 547 he defeated Lydia and the Greek poleis on the Ionian coast of Asia Minor; and finally, in 539, he invaded Babylonia and was greeted by the conquered peoples as a liberating hero. Cyrus had become the ruler of the largest empire the world had ever seen. He was probably a practising Zoroastrian, but he did not impose his faith on his subjects. In Egypt, Cyrus was called the servant of Amun Re; in Babylon, he was the son of Marduk; and a Judean prophet called him the *messiach,* the "anointed king" of Yahweh.[41] We do not know this prophet's name. He was active in Babylonia during the second half of the sixth century, and because his oracles were preserved in the same scroll as those of Isaiah, he is usually called Second Isaiah. He had watched Cyrus's progress with mounting excitement, convinced that the suffering of the exiled community was coming to an end. Yahweh had called Cyrus to be his servant, and his imperial mission would change the history of the world.[42] He had promised to repatriate all deportees, so Jerusalem would be rebuilt and the land restored. There would be a new exodus: once again,



Jewish exiles would journey through the wilderness to their Promised Land.

Instead of the anguished, wrenching visions of Ezekiel, Second Isaiah could see a glorious future, which he described in lyrical, psalmlike poetry. He spoke of magical events and a transformed creation. Unlike the Deuteronomists, who had scorned the old mythology, Second Isaiah relied upon a mythical tradition that had little connection with the Pentateuch. Instead of P's orderly creation story, he revived the ancient tales of Yahweh, the divine warrior, slaying the sea dragon to bring order out of primordial chaos,[43] reinstating the violence that P had so carefully excluded from his cosmology. Yahweh, he announced joyfully, was about to repeat his cosmic victory over the sea by defeating the historical enemies of Israel.

But these exuberant prophecies were punctuated by four extraordinary poems about a man of sorrows, who called himself Yahweh's servant.[44] We have no idea who the servant was. Was he, perhaps, the exiled king of Judah? Or did he symbolize the whole community of deportees? Many scholars believe that these poems were not the work of Second Isaiah, and some have even suggested that the servant was the prophet himself, whose inflammatory oracles may have offended the Babylonian authorities. Others regard the servant as the archetypal exilic hero, who expressed a religious ideal that was deeply in tune with the ethos of the Axial Age. For some of the exiles, the suffering servant was their model—not the divine warrior.

In the first poem, the servant announced that he had been chosen by Yahweh for a special mission. Filled with God's own spirit, he was entrusted with the gigantic task of establishing justice throughout the world. But he would not achieve this by force of arms. There would be no battles and no aggressive self-assertion. The servant would conduct a nonviolent, compassionate campaign:

> *He does not cry out or shout aloud*
> *or make his voice heard in the streets.*
> *He does not break the crushed reed,*
> *nor quench the wavering flame.*[45]

The servant had sometimes felt hopeless, but Lord Yahweh always came to his aid, so he could stand firm, set his face like flint, and remain untouched by insult and humiliation. He had never retaliated violently, but resolutely turned the other cheek.

For my part I made no resistance, neither did I turn away.
I offered my back to those who struck me,
my cheeks to those who tore at my beard;
I did not cover my face
against insult and spittle.[46]

God would judge and punish the servant's enemies, who would simply melt away, disintegrating like a moth-ridden garment.

The fourth song looked ahead to this final triumph. At present, the servant inspired only revulsion; he was "despised and rejected by men," so disfigured that he seemed scarcely human. People turned their faces away in horror and disgust. But, Yahweh promised, he would eventually be "lifted up, exalted, rise to great heights." The people who had watched his degradation would be speechless with astonishment, but they would eventually realize that he had suffered for them: "Ours were the sufferings he bore, ours the sorrows he carried. . . . He was punished for our faults, crushed for our sins." By his courageous, serene acceptance of pain, he had brought them peace and healing.[47] It was a remarkable vision of suffering. In their hour of triumph, the servant reminded Israel that pain was an ever-present reality, but his kenosis led to exaltation and *ekstasis.* His benevolence was universal, reaching out from his immediate circle to include the entire world—to the distant islands and the remotest peoples. It was not enough "to restore the tribes of Jacob," Yahweh told him; he was to be "the light of the nations, so that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth."[48]

By contrast, the oracles of Second Isaiah had a harsh message for the nations who opposed Israel in any way. They would be "destroyed and brought to nothing," scattered like chaff on the wind. Even those foreign rulers who helped Israel would have to fall prostrate on the ground before the Israelites, licking the dust at their feet.[49] In these passages, Israel's role was not to be a humble servant of humanity, but to demonstrate the mighty power of Yahweh, the warrior god. There seem to be two contending visions in this text, and perhaps there were two schools of thought in the exiled community at this point. The servant triumphed by nonviolence and self-effacement; he saw the sufferings of Israel as redemptive. But other exiles anticipated a new order based on the subjection of others. One ethos was profoundly in tune with the Axial Age; the other straining to break free from it. This tension would continue within Israel.

Second Isaiah believed that the historic reversals of his time would enable both Israel and the foreign nations "to know that I am Yahweh."[50]

These words recur again and again. This new exercise of divine power would show everybody who Yahweh was and what he could do. Motivated entirely by the desire to help his people, he had inspired the career of Cyrus, caused an international, worldwide political revolution, and cast down the mighty empire of Babylon. When Israel returned home, Yahweh would transform the wilderness into a lake, and plant cedars, acacias, myrtles, and olives to delight his people on their homeward journey. Could any other deity match this? No, Yahweh declared scornfully to the gods of the *goyim,* "you are nothing, and your works are nothingness." Nobody in their right mind would worship them.[51] Yahweh had annihilated the other deities and become in effect the *only* God, his vitality in sharp contrast with the lifeless, inanimate effigies of the Babylonian deities.[52] "I am Yahweh, unrivalled," he announced proudly. "There is no other god besides me."[53]

This is the first unequivocal biblical assertion of monotheism, the belief that only one God exists. The doctrine is often seen as the great triumph of the Jewish Axial Age, but in the way that it is phrased, it seems to retreat from some fundamental Axial principles. Instead of looking forward to a period of universal peace and compassion, Second Isaiah's aggressive deity looks back to the pre-Axial divine warrior:

Yahweh advances like a hero,
His fury is stirred like a warrior's.
He gives the war shout, raises hue and cry,
Marches valiantly against his foes.[54]

Unlike the self-emptying servant, this God cannot stop asserting himself: "I, I am Yahweh!" Where the servant refused to "break the crushed reed,"[55] this aggressive deity could not wait to see the *goyim* marching behind the Israelites in chains. Instead of recoiling from the violence, like so many of the other Axial sages, Second Isaiah gave it sacred endorsement.

The prophet's focus on the earthly city of Jerusalem also seemed to turn the clock back to an older, less developed theological vision. In India and China, the cult was being steadily internalized, and in Israel too Ezekiel's mandala of a holy city had represented an interior, spiritual ascent to the divine. But the pivot of Second Isaiah's hopes was the earthly Zion. Yahweh would work a miracle there, transforming its desolate ruins into an earthly paradise. The "glory" of Yahweh, which Ezekiel had seen leaving the city, would return to Mount Zion, and—most important—"all mankind shall see it."[56] Second Isaiah was expecting something dramatic.

Before the exile, the "glory" had been evoked and reenacted in the temple rituals, but in the restored Jerusalem (whose walls and battlements would be studded with precious jewels), the divine presence would be more tangible. The returned exiles would experience the glory directly, and because Yahweh would be with his people in such a public, incontrovertible way, they would be safe for ever. No nation would dare to attack them again:

> *Remote from oppression, you will have nothing to fear;*
> *Remote from terror, it will not approach you. . . .*
> *Not a weapon forged against you will succeed.*[57]

Second Isaiah's promises were disconcertingly close to those of the "false prophets" who had predicted that Jerusalem could never fall to the Babylonians. What would happen if these very precise prophecies were not fulfilled?

At first everything went wondrously according to plan. Shortly after Cyrus conquered Babylon, in the autumn of 539, he issued an edict ordering that the gods of the subject peoples, whose effigies Nebuchadnezzar had carried off to Babylonia, should be returned to their own lands, that their temples should be rebuilt, and their cultic furniture and utensils restored. Because gods needed worshippers, the deportees could also return home. Cyrus's policy was tolerant but also pragmatic. It was cheaper and more efficient than the massive resettlement programmes that had characterized Assyrian and Babylonian imperialism. Cyrus would not only earn the gratitude of his subjects, but would also win the favour of their gods.

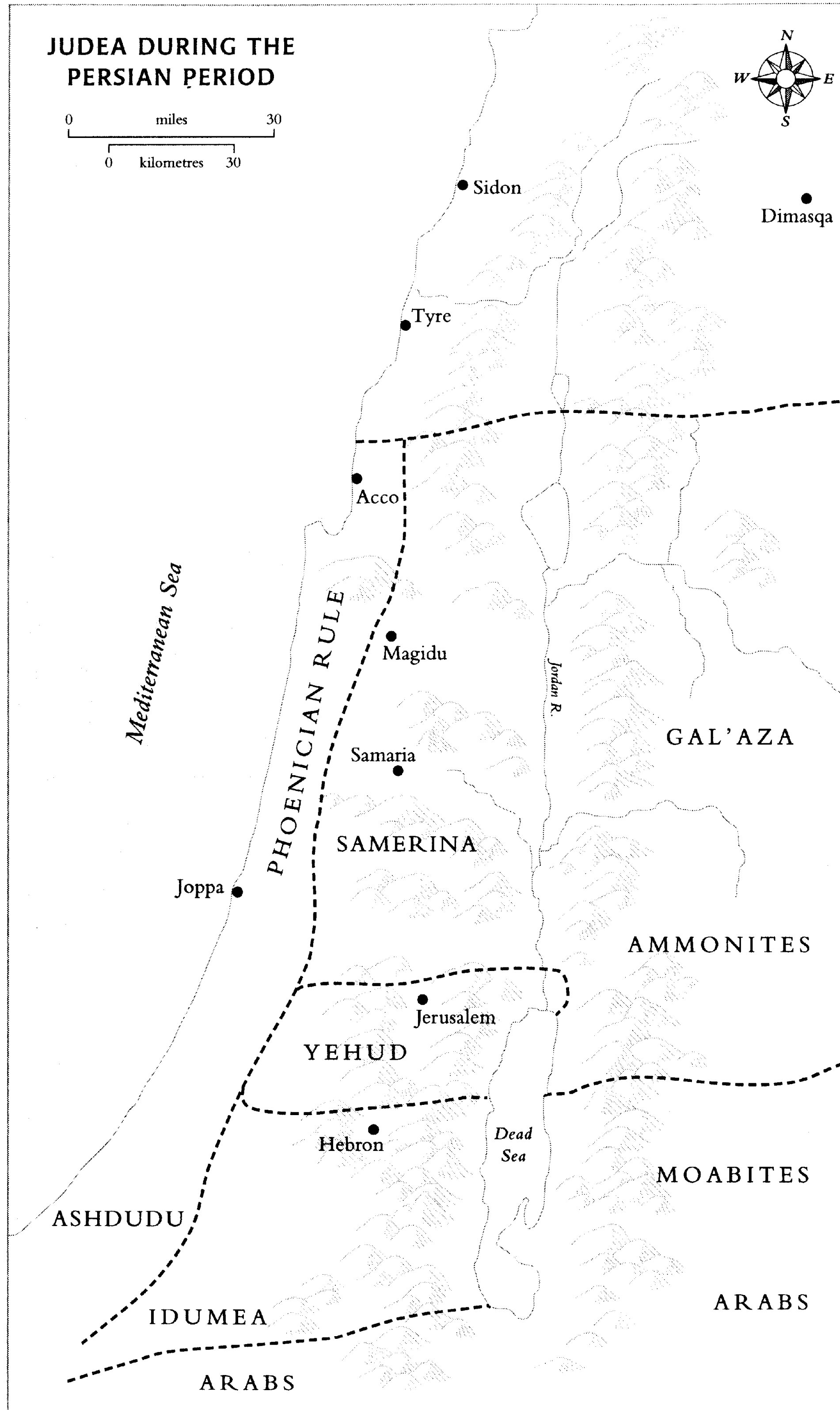
A few months after Cyrus's coronation, a party of Jewish exiles set out for Jerusalem, with the gold and silver vessels that Nebuchadnezzar had confiscated from the temple. The Bible tells us that 42,360 Judeans made the journey home, together with their servants and two hundred temple singers,[58] but in fact the first batch of returnees was probably quite small, since most of the exiles chose to stay in Babylon.[59] The leader of the returning party was Sheshbazzar, the *nasi* ("vassal king") of Judah. We know nothing about him. He may have been a member of the Davidic royal house, and if so, he would have kissed Cyrus's hands as a sign of fealty and was the official representative of the Persian government. Judah had become part of the fifth province (satrapy) of the Persian empire, which comprised all territories west of the Euphrates.

We know almost nothing about these early years in Judah, since the biblical account is confused and incomplete. Sheshbazzar disappeared from the record, and we have no idea what happened to him. We hear nothing more about the Golah, the community of returned exiles, until 520, the second year of the reign of Darius (521–486), the third Persian emperor. The leader of the Judean community in Jerusalem was now Zerubbabel, the grandson of King Jehoiachin, who shared power with Joshua, the high priest. He too disappeared mysteriously after his term of office, and for fifty years we have no information about events in Judah.

If the Golah had arrived in Judah with the prophecies of Second Isaiah ringing in their ears, they must have come down to earth very quickly when they saw their new home. Most of them had been born in exile, and Judah would have seemed bleak, alien, and desolate after the sophistication of Babylonia. Used to the Babylonian way of life, they must have felt like foreigners in their own land. The country was full of strangers, who, like themselves, had lost their national status after the Babylonian wars, and while they had been away, Philistines, Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Arabs, and Phoenicians had settled in the coastal plain, the Jezreel Valley, and the highlands. The returnees called them all the *am ha-aretz,* "the people of the land." The new arrivals were also reunited with their fellow Israelites after an absence of seventy years. Judah was administered from Samerina, as the capital of the old northern kingdom was now known, and the returning exiles had to present their letters to the Israelite governors there when they arrived.[60] In exile, the deportees had changed their religion quite radically. How would they relate to the Yahwists who had never left Judah, who worshipped other gods beside Yahweh, and adhered to practices that now seemed barbaric and alien?

The building project stalled, and twenty years after the return of the Golah, Yahweh still had no temple. The restoration was not proving to be as easy as Second Isaiah had predicted. The former exiles had no building experience, and had nowhere to live, so most of them agreed that the temple would have to wait until they had new homes. But in 520, a few months after the arrival of Zerubbabel, Haggai, a new prophet, told the returnees that their priorities were wrong. The reason that the harvests were so bad and the economy in recession was that they had built houses for themselves and left Yahweh's dwelling place in ruins.[61] Duly chastened, the Golah went back to work.

The foundations were completed by the autumn of 520, and on the date of the traditional autumn festival, the Golah assembled for the cere-



mony of rededication. Priests processed into the sacred area, singing psalms and clashing cymbals. But a few of them were old enough to remember the magnificent temple of Solomon; others probably had unrealistic expectations. When they saw the modest site of this second temple, they burst into tears.[62] Haggai tried to rally their spirits. He promised the Golah that the second temple would be greater than the first. Soon Yahweh would rule the whole world from Mount Zion. Haggai's colleague Zechariah agreed. He predicted that Yahweh's "glory" would return when all his exiles returned home. Foreigners too would flock to Jerusalem. Men of every nation would "take a Jew by the sleeve and say, 'We want to go with you, since we have learned that God is with you.' "[63] Both Haggai and Zechariah believed that they were at a turning point of history, but they had not adopted the exclusive vision of Second Isaiah. Zechariah saw Jews leading the *goyim* peacefully into the temple. He wanted Jerusalem to be an open city. It must have no walls, because of the large number of men and livestock that would come to live there.[64] And neither Haggai nor Zechariah showed any hostility to Samerina and the old northern kingdom.[65]

This inclusive spirit was also evident in the two books of Chronicles, which were probably written during the building of the second temple.[66] These priestly authors revised the Deuteronomic history to meet the problems of the early restoration period. First, they stressed the centrality of the temple, regarding the house of David simply as the instrument used by God to establish the temple and its cult. Second, they insisted that the temple had always been the shrine of all the tribes of Israel, not just the Judahites. The chronicler omitted the Deuteronomist polemic against the north, and looked forward to the reestablishment of the united kingdom of David. He gave great prominence to Hezekiah's reforms, and imagined him inviting all the tribes, from Dan to Beersheba, to celebrate Passover in Jerusalem.[67] There was no peroration condemning the northern kingdom after the disaster of 722, and no account of the Assyrians importing foreigners into the region. The chronicler did not want to ostracize the northern tribes or those who had not gone into exile. His aim was to unite the people of Yahweh around their sanctuary. The first version of Chronicles probably concluded with the consecration of the second temple's foundations in 520. It was true, the chronicler admitted, that some of the old priests wept aloud, remembering the glories of the old temple. But others raised their voices in delight, "and nobody could distinguish the shouts of joy from the sound of the people's weeping; for the people shouted so loudly that the noise could be heard far away."[68] Pain and joy