slavery in Egypt, where he gains influence and later invites the other Israelites during a period of drought in Canaan. The line of Abraham's descendants is then lost, but the story of the Israelites is continued in the Biblical book of Exodus many years later.

In Exodus, Moses leads his now enslaved tribe out of Egypt and back towards the land of Canaan. Moses is viewed not only as a monotheist, but also as the first to learn God's personal name, Yahweh (or Jehovah in English), and as the recipient of the Commandments or the Law (Hebrew torah, and Arabic tawrat). Moses's successor Joshua leads the Israelites to conquer the cities of Canaan, and the land is subsequently known by the name of the newly-ruling tribe of Israel. Finally, the Biblical Books of Kings recount the rule of David and Solomon as divinely-appointed monotheist monarchs of Israel.



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The above picture of Biblical history is almost entirely retained in the Qur'an, with a few minor changes such as Abraham being relocated to Mecca rather than Ur (in order that he be able to build the Ka'ba). Thus Jews, Christians and Muslims all take for granted that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and Moses were monotheists. However, the monotheism of the early Israelites has been questioned by many modern historians of religion. A very brief introduction to this debate is given in the first chapter of Karen Armstrong's book, *A History of God.*

One point to bear in mind is that the tribe of Israel incorporates in its own name an evocation of its ancient deity: namely El. In Hebrew, El is usually translated simply as "god" or "God"; but is also the name of one of the chief gods of the polytheist Canaanites. Another point to bear in mind is that Hebrew and Canaanite are essentially different dialects of the same language. Thus we should not be surprised if there is overlap of religious language. The Hebrew words isra-el thus mean either "El strives" or "one who strives with El." The latter meaning is used in the Biblical story of how Jacob gains this name through literally wrestling with God.

Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he could not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob's hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, "Let me go, for the day is breaking." But Jacob said, "I will not let you go, unless you bless me." So he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob." Then the man said, "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed." Then Jacob asked him, "Please tell me your name." But he said, "Why is it that you ask my name?" And there he blessed him. So Jacob called the place Peni-El (Hebrew for "face of God"), saying, "For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved." (Genesis 32:24-30)

The above passage is quite bizarre in terms of the modern concepts of monotheism. God (whose name of El is confirmed in the place name Peni-El) is depicted as a mysterious spirit of the night who must escape before sunrise. This Jacob story shows that the Israelites acknowledged that their original deity was El from a very early point in their history, or they would not use this particular divine name to identify the name of their tribe. As a side note, the word translated simply as "God" above is the Hebrew word Elohim; it is actually a plural form. This word will become significant later in our discussion.

The early Israelite worship of El is further supported by various other Biblical passages. Abraham and his descendants are recorded as worshipping El under the name of El-Shaddai (Hebrew for "El of the mountain," but traditionally translated "God Almighty") numerous times.

When Abraham was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abraham and said to him, "I am El-Shaddai; walk before me, and be blameless." (Genesis 17:1)

Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him, and charged him, "May El-Shaddai bless you and make you fruitful and numerous." (Genesis 28:1-3)

God appeared to Jacob again ... and he blessed him. God said to him, "Your name is Jacob; no longer shall you be called Jacob, but Israel shall be your name." So he was called Israel. God said to him, "I am El Shaddai; be fruitful and multiply; a nation and a company of nations shall come from you, and kings shall spring from you." (Genesis 35:9-11)

Then their father Israel (previously