

1 Vyasa

Born Kalpi, India (?), date unknown

Place and date of death unknown

The world's oldest living religion was a mature, sophisticated faith long before recorded history. For centuries before the Hindu scriptures were written down, priests in northern India passed them from generation to generation through memorization and chanting.

Those scriptures are called the Vedas (Sanskrit for knowledge), traditionally dated from around 3000 BCE. The Vedas are largely a collection of hymns, containing over twenty thousand stanzas. Many Hindus believe that when a previous universe was dissolved, Brahma, the Creator God, preserved the eternal Veda and transmitted it to priests in this universe when humanity was ready to receive it.

The Vedas comprise a complex text affirming life and emphasizing duty to family and the larger world. Vedic hymns address various gods who adapt themselves to times and places to meet specific human needs, but all gods are expressions of the one supreme and unknowable God, Brahman (not to be confused with Brahma). Hindus believe one may worship God under any name and in sundry ways. Affirming many paths to the divine, including other faiths, Hindus do not seek converts. Any faith teaching right conduct can lead the believer to God.

No one knows when the Vedas were written down (some speculate around 500 BCE, some say much earlier), but we know who wrote them down. His name was Krishna Dvaipayana, commonly known as Vyasa, a Sanskrit word meaning divider or splitter, since, for clarification and ease of access, he divided the original Veda into four collections with separate names (hence "the Vedas," plural).

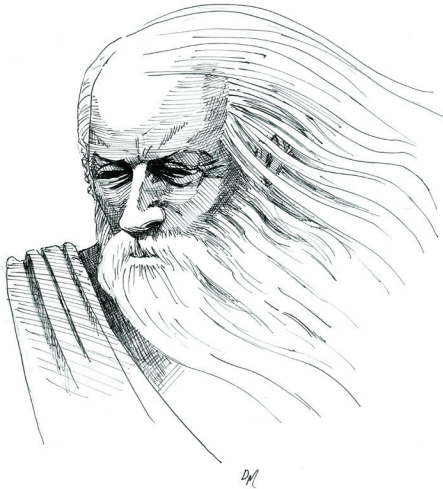
Tradition says Vyasa was born on an island in the Yamuna River, near modern Delhi, the son of a Hindu sage and a fisherwoman. Little is known of his life, but an additional sacred epic poem, the Mahabharata, fifteen times the length of the Christian Bible, is also attributed to him. Vyasa also appears as a major character in it. The Mahabharata has helped impress on Indian society the importance of right behavior and doing faithfully what one is meant to do.

Truth cannot be suppressed and always is the ultimate victor. —Yajur Veda

Do not be led by others, awaken your own mind, amass your own experience, and choose your own path. —Atharva Veda

Let noble thoughts come from every direction. —Rig Veda

What in Hinduism has enabled it to flourish for five thousand years?



2 Abraham

Born early second millennium BCE,
at Tell el-Muqayyah, Iraq (?)

Died early second millennium BCE, possibly near
Hebron, Israel

The mists of legend and prehistory shroud the patriarch revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims as their earliest hero of the faith. Some scholars suggest that the Abraham of the Bible and the Quran was not a single individual, but a tribe or composite figure representing several ancient leaders whose names are lost to us. Both Jews and Arabs claim descent from Abraham; the name means “father of a multitude.”

In the Hebrew Bible, the Lord directs Abraham to “go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” Abraham obeys and God then gives him and his descendants the land of Canaan (modern Israel and Palestine), promising to make of Abraham’s progeny a great nation. This promise, fulfilled through Abraham’s son Isaac, is the biblical basis of the modern Israeli nation’s claim to the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River. Years later, in a terrifying encounter, God tests Abraham by commanding him to slay the boy Isaac on a remote mountaintop, a command Abraham was prepared to obey until an angel stopped him at the last instant. One of the names of God in the Hebrew Bible is “the shield of Abraham.”

For Christians, Abraham is the great paragon of faith. The apostle Paul (see #23) twice writes that “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Abraham was right with God, Paul says, not because of any acts of obedience, but because he believed and trusted God. Paul contrasts this to what he perceived as rabbinic Judaism’s excessive legalism. All who trust God, not adherents of the law, are the true descendants of Abraham and children of God, Paul says.

Arabs trace their descent from Abraham through his older son, Ishmael. Abraham is a major figure in the Quran, which portrays him as a champion of monotheism and the archetypal Muslim. He boldly challenges his father to abandon his idols and worship the one true God. The Quran also includes the story of the sacrifice of Abraham’s son, who is not named but whom Muslims presume to be Ishmael. Abraham’s name is closely linked with Mecca, “the city of Abraham,” where he constructs the world’s first mosque, the Kaaba.

In what way was Abraham a “hero of the faith”?



3

Akhenaten

Born 1385 BCE (?), in Thebes, Egypt

Died 1336 or 1334 BCE, in el-Amarna, Egypt

Akhenaten was little more than a name until the discovery and excavation in the nineteenth century of the ruins of Amarna, his spectacular capital in the Egyptian desert. Interest in the enigmatic pharaoh and his queen, Nefertiti, grew as art from Akhenaten's reign, unlike any other in ancient Egypt, and his revolutionary religious reforms became known.

Upon becoming pharaoh around 1352 BCE, he took the name Akhenaten, which included the name of the Egyptian sun god, Aten. At court, Aten was worshiped solely and directly, while the common people also worshiped only Aten, but through Akhenaten, making him both king and priest.

Some suspect Akhenaten's motives were more political than religious. But others have seen him as the world's first monotheist. While he worshiped one god, he may have stopped short of denying the reality of other deities. Even this, however, was a radical departure from Egypt's polytheistic past, and the country's official religion became, for practical purposes, a strict monotheism. An iconoclastic campaign ensued, with temples and images of other gods destroyed and their priestly orders disbanded.

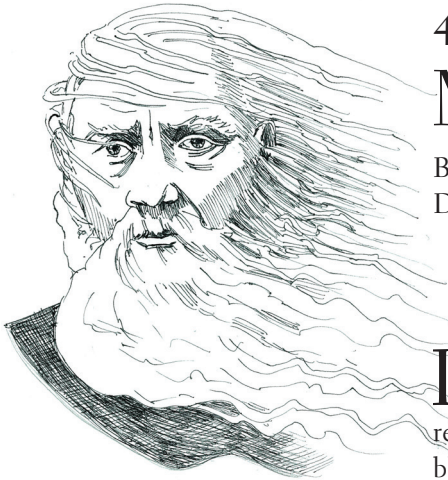
Amarna was built where the sun rose between two cliffs and Aten was always worshiped in broad sunlight rather than in dark temple interiors. Art from the era represents Aten as creator of all things and hints that no artist can begin to convey his true nature.

This sounded like genuine monotheism to nineteenth- and early twentieth-century scholars. Some, including Sigmund Freud, speculated that Akhenaten's monotheism had influenced Moses (see #4). Most scholars today, however, say a link between Akhenaten and Moses is unlikely. Jewish monotheism originated elsewhere.

Not surprisingly, devotees of traditional Egyptian religion disliked Akhenaten's reforms. Within a decade after his death, his son and successor, Tutankhamun, destroyed the temples and images commissioned by his father and the country returned to its polytheistic past. Amarna was soon a ruin and Akhenaten's name was omitted from subsequent lists of Egyptian pharaohs.

How manifold are the things you have made! They are hidden from the human face. Only god, like whom there is no other! Solely and alone, you created the world as you desired: human beings, cattle, and wild beasts, everything on earth, whether moving on feet or flying on high with wings. —from a hymn composed by Akhenaten

What similarities and differences do you see between Akhenaten's faith and later monotheistic faiths?



4 Moses

Born fourteenth century BCE (?), in Lower Egypt
Died thirteenth century BCE (?), on Mt. Nebo, Jordan

Driven into Egypt by a famine in Canaan, Abraham's (see #2) Hebrew descendants were soon reduced to slavery there, according to the Hebrew Bible. A Hebrew raised in Egypt's royal household would eventually free them. His name was Moses.

Nothing in the life of the great liberator, lawgiver, and founder of the Israelite nation can be verified from other sources, but the story of Moses, as told in the Bible and the Quran, points to a visionary leader of extraordinary energy and rugged determination.

Calling to Moses from a mysterious bush which was aflame but not consumed, God sent Moses to tell the Egyptian pharaoh to "let my people go" back to Canaan, their ancestral homeland. When Pharaoh refused, God sent ten plagues upon the Egyptians, culminating in the Passover, when the angel of death slew the eldest sons of every Egyptian household but spared the Israelites. Jews to this day commemorate this event as one of their foremost holy days. Moses then led the fleeing Israelites through the Red Sea, into the Sinai desert.

The Bible tells of God's feeding, leading, and protecting the Israelites during their forty years of desert wandering, despite their constant grumbling that they preferred slavery in Egypt to freedom in the desert. Moses chafes under the burden of caring for such a carping tribe and complains to God that he'd rather be killed than continue as their leader.

The pivotal event of the Israelites' desert sojourn was Moses's ascent of Mt. Sinai, where God initiated a covenant with the Israelites and gave Moses the Ten Commandments. "I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people," God said.

Moses died at the age of 120, according to the Bible, on the slopes of Mt. Nebo, where he gazed across the Jordan River into the land God had promised to the descendants of Abraham and Isaac. Tradition holds that he is the author of the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, the Torah.

Much of this story is told in the Quran as well, where Moses is a great prophet, known as Musa and mentioned in the Quran more often than any other person. Muslims believe that Moses foretold the coming of the prophet Muhammad (see #45). The lives of the two prophets are parallel in many ways.

How would you describe Moses as a leader?