

1 Faith in Judaism, Christianity and Islam

1.1 Setting the Scene

Before embarking on an exploration of the relationship between monotheism and faith, we should start by stating the obvious, namely that the nature of the latter (as, indeed, the former) is complex and nuanced. For example, there are both propositional (*fides quae creditur*; cf. orthodoxy) and dispositional (*fides qua creditur*; cf. orthopraxy) dimensions to faith, with much debate over how they relate to one another. Can you believe in a God of love whilst practising hatred or embody faith, hope and love whilst remaining an avowed atheist? Then there is the highly contentious question about the significance of faith within the salvific processes of a religion. Is faith a means of securing salvation and, if so, how does that sit within a system of belief rooted in divine grace? And does faith's salvific potential depend on believing aright or acting accordingly? Nor should we overlook the range of human aptitudes or responses constituting faith in its various manifestations: affirmation, allegiance, assent, assurance, belief, confidence, credibility, doctrine, endurance, faithfulness, fecundity, fidelity, integrity, knowledge, obedience, perception, perseverance, pledge, profession, security, steadfastness, testimony and trust, to name but a few.

All this begs the question of how faith can be identified and, indeed, whether it lends itself to precise or even meaningful definition. One approach is to focus on lexical stock (e.g. belief/faith in English, *credo/fides* in Latin, *pisteuô/pistis* in Greek, *âman* root in Hebrew, *îmân* root in Arabic, etc.), but the semantics of designated words are rarely, if ever, coterminous with the phenomenon they can denote.¹ So, for instance, whilst the righteous will live by 'faith/faithfulness' (*'emûnâh*, Habakkuk 2:4), Moses' hands were 'steady' (*'emûnâh*) until the sun set (Exodus 17:12) – the same Hebrew word is employed, but with very different meanings. Further, sometimes faith is assumed even when it is not specifically identified. Take Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son, Isaac. The Genesis 22 account makes no mention of the patriarch's faith, although later Jewish, together with Christian and Islamic, interpretations make explicit what is surely implicit within the earliest version (e.g. Jubilees 17:15–18; 2 Maccabees 2:52; 4 Maccabees 16:19–22; Hebrews 11:17; Quran 37:111).

In the light of these observations, throughout the following survey of ancient Scriptures and their interpretative traditions, a nuanced approach has been adopted in which vocabulary associated with faith supplies a point of departure, whilst recognizing that even here context must determine whether particular

¹ James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 161–205.

instantiations should be interpreted in this way. In turn, passages making explicit reference to faith with its attendant characteristics will alert us to its presence in other contexts where it is assumed or can be deduced. By proceeding in this manner, hopefully we will be able to supply an adequate account of the phenomenon under review without becoming so broad or ill-defined as to render the whole enterprise vacuous.

1.2 Sacred Belief in the Ancient World

Although, as we shall demonstrate shortly, faith-language features significantly within the scriptural traditions of the three principal monotheistic religions, they have no exclusive claim to it in the ancient world, where it finds expression in religious contexts with respect to both credulity over the existence of divine beings as well as their alleged oracles or wonders, and trust-like responses to the same.² With respect to the former, consider the following selection drawn from across the genres of ancient Greek literature:

At any rate, one should not disbelieve the god (*tô theô goun ouk apistein eikos*) (Euripides [480–406 BCE], *Ion* 557 [LCL 10]). [F]or he [Aristodicus son of Heraclides] disbelieved the oracle and thought that those who had inquired of the god spoke untruly (*apisteôn te tô chrêsmô*) (Herodotus [c. 484–c. 425 BCE], *Histories* 1.158 [LCL 117]). Are we assured, then, that there are two causes, amongst those we previously discussed, which lead to faith in the gods (*tô . . . theôn . . . pistin*)? (Plato [c. 420–c. 348 BCE], *Laws* 12.966d [LCL 192]). Obviously then, he would not have given the counsel if he had not believed (*episteuen*) that what he said would come true. And who could have inspired him with such belief (*pisteuseien*) but a god (*theô*)? And since he had belief in the gods, how can he have questioned their existence (*pisteuôn de theois pôs ouk einai theous enomizen*)? (Xenophon [431–354 BCE], *Memorabilia* 1.1.5 [LCL 168*]).

Although less common, there are ancient texts where faith extends beyond credulity to embrace trust and fidelity. It is in this vein that the Athenian statesman Aristides (530–468 BCE) comments on the piety (*eusebeias*) of fellow civilians resulting from their faith in the gods (*dia tèn pistin hên en tois theois eichon*; *Panathenaic Oration* 155 [LCL 533]). Or, again, Aristotle's (384–322 BCE) observation that 'Fortunate men stand in a certain relation to the divinity and love the gods (*to theion*), believing on the basis of the benefits they have received from fortune' (*pisteuontes dia ta gignomena agatha apo tês tychês*; *Rhetoric* 2.17 [LCL 193*]). No ancient author, however, engages in the spectrum of meanings and applications of faith in relation to the divine more

² For a fuller review, see Teresa Morgan, *Roman Faith and Christian Faith: Pistis and Fides in the Early Roman Empire and Early Churches* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 122–75.

than the Greek biographer and essayist Plutarch (c. 50–c. 120 CE). As the following extended quotation illustrates, he recognized how belief in the gods could restrain destructive behaviour whilst supplying meaning and form to life, thereby engendering joy, hope and well-being:

Now we should, I grant you, remove superstition (*deisidaimonian*) from our belief in the gods (*tês peri theôn doxês*) like a rheum from the eye; but if this proves impossible, we should not cut away both together and kill the faith that most men have in the gods (*tên pistin hên hoi pleistoi peri theôn echousin*) No, among mankind a few are afraid of God who would not be better off without that fear; for since they fear him as a ruler mild to the good and hating the wicked, by this one fear, which keeps them from doing wrong On the other hand the attitude toward God that we find in the ignorant but not greatly wicked majority of mankind contains no doubt along with the sense of reverence and honour an element of tremulous fear (and from this we get our term for superstition); but outweighing this a thousand times is the element of cheerful hope, of exultant joy, and whether in prayer or in thanksgiving of ascribing every furtherance of felicity to the gods. This is proved by the strongest kind of evidence: no visit delights us more than a visit to a temple; no occasion than a holy day; no act or spectacle than what we see and what we do ourselves in matters that involve the gods, whether we celebrate a ritual or take part in a choral dance or attend a sacrifice or ceremony of initiation. (*Moralia* 1101c [LCL 428])

One observation arising from this brief survey is that the language of belief can be employed in relation to divine beings and their alleged communications with mortals in a manner that implies no exclusive allegiance to a single deity. That is to say, whilst faith was increasingly being recognized as the currency of human–divine encounter, there was nothing inherently monotheistic about it. As the Graeco-Roman pantheons bear witness, it was quite possible not only to believe in the existence of multiple deities, but also to worship at their sanctuaries without any sense of compromise or infidelity.

That said, we should also note that philosophical monotheism has an ancient pedigree which reaches back through Aristotle’s ‘unmoved mover’ (*proton akinêton*) and Plato’s self-generating creative ‘Demiurge’ (*dêmiourgos*), both of whom are postulated through the application of deductive reasoning,³ to the Greek polymath Xenophanes (570–475 BCE) who advocated, ‘One god, the greatest among gods and men, neither in form like unto mortals nor in thought. He sees all over, thinks all over, and hears all over. But without toil he swayeth

³ Aristotle discusses his ‘unmoved mover’ in *Physics* and *Metaphysics*, whilst Plato makes his case for a ‘Demiurge’ in *Timaeus*.

all things by the thought of his mind'.⁴ Although the existence of other deities is not denied, we can discern here the beginning of a line of thinking which Aristotle works through to its logical conclusion. Interestingly, Aristotle could use the language of belief in relation to his monotheistic contentions: 'So from these considerations one would be led to believe (*pisteuseien*) that there is a prime mover (*proton akinêton*), itself unmoved; and the conviction is strengthened by a consideration of the initiating principles of the (more familiar) agents of motion' (*Physics* 259a [LCL 255]).

1.3 Faith in Judaism

On turning to Judaism, few figures come into focus as paradigms of faith with greater clarity than Abraham (Abram).⁵ The earliest sources of the Pentateuch, the Yahwist ('J', 950–850 BCE) and the Elohist ('E', 850–750 BCE), present the patriarch as a gratuitous recipient of divine favour in the form of land to inherit and an heir to inhabit it, through which his burgeoning people would become a source of blessing to all nations. According to Genesis 12 (J), Abraham and Sarah (Sara), despite their advancing years, respond obediently and set off from their homeland. In chapter 15, however, which may well be another version of the same foundational memory or event (E?), Abraham questions how this can come about given his wife is beyond the age of fertility. Subsequent divine reassurance elicits what becomes a definitive response: 'And he believed (*he'e-min*) the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness' (15:6).⁶ Although both 'reckon' (*khâshab*) and 'righteousness' (*tsedâkah*) can carry forensic connotations, the context does not favour such a meaning, although later interpretations would reach a different conclusion.⁷ Instead, a relational

⁴ *Fragments* 23–5 (John Burnet, *Early Greek Philosophy*, 3rd ed. [London: A. & C. Black, 1920], chapter 2, §57).

⁵ The literature on Abraham is vast – here is a selection. Primary sources: Louis Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, trans. Henrietta Szold and Paul Radin, 5 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1909–38) and James L. Kugel, *The Bible as It Was* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 131–48. Historicity: John van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975) and Thomas L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974). Ecumenical approaches: Karl-Josef Kuschel, *Abraham: A Symbol of Hope for Jews, Christians and Muslims*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM, 1995) and Jon D. Levenson, *Inheriting Abraham: The Legacy of the Patriarch in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

⁶ Unless indicated to the contrary, all biblical translations come from the *New Revised Standard Version*.

⁷ For example, 'And he had faith in the word of the Lord and it was reckoned to him for merit because he did not argue before him with words' (Targum Pseudo-Jonathan on Genesis 15:6 [trans. John Bowker, *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature: An Introduction to Jewish Interpretations of Scripture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969, 2011)]; 'That God marvelling at Abraham's faith in Him repaid him with faithfulness by confirming with an oath the

dynamic seems more apt where faith becomes the medium for ‘right-relating’ with God. Equally, the context stresses the trusting complexion of faith, albeit a trust precipitating concrete action: there would be no offspring without conjugal relations and no land without adventure. Inherent, then, to faith is risk and vulnerability, as the familiar world of past experience gives way to liminality where the contours are drawn by divine promise and its ensuing possibilities.

Interestingly, later interpreters of Abraham’s faith place the stress upon his faithfulness or obedience, either in general terms (e.g. Nehemiah 9:7–8; Jubilees 17:15–18; 2 Maccabees 1:2) or with specific reference to his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, the sole heir of God’s promises (Genesis 22:1–19) – the incident which above all becomes emblematic of the patriarch’s *’emûnâh*:

And the LORD called Abraham by his name again from heaven just as he caused us to appear so that we might speak to him in the name of the LORD. And he said, ‘I swear by myself, says the LORD, because you have done this thing and you have not denied your firstborn son, whom you love, to me that I shall surely bless you and I shall surely multiply your seed like the stars of heaven and like the sand of the seashore and your seed will inherit the cities of their enemies. And all of the nations of the earth will bless themselves by your seed because you obeyed my word. And I have made known to all that you are faithful to me in everything which I say to you. Go in peace’. (Jubilees 18:14–16 [OTP]; also Sirach 44:19–21; 2 Maccabees 2:52; 4 Maccabees 16:19–25)

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given its importance within an emerging Israelite/Jewish identity, Abraham’s paradigmatic role extends to embrace Torah observance. As early as the second century BCE, he is portrayed as the one who ‘kept the law of the Most High, and entered into a covenant with him; he certified the covenant in his flesh, and when he was tested he proved faithful’ (Sirach 44:20; also Jubilees 6:17–19). The Alexandrian Jew, Philo (20 BCE–50 CE), aware of the anachronistic nature of such a claim, explains how it was possible given the Torah had not been communicated to Moses, taking his cue from a verse in Genesis (26:5): ‘He [Abraham] did them, not taught by written words, but unwritten nature gave him the zeal to follow where wholesome and untainted impulse led him. And when they have God’s promises before them what should men do but trust in them most firmly?’ (*peri de hôn ho theos homologeî, ti prosêken anthrôpous ê bebaiotata pisteuein*) (*On Abraham* 275; ‘one who obeyed the law’, 276 [LCL 289]; also Mishnah, Kiddushin 4.14).

This passage from Philo alerts us to the continuing appreciation of the trust-like qualities of faith, in addition to the emphasis on faithful

gifts which He had promised, and here He no longer talked with him as God with man but as a friend with a familiar’ (Philo, *On Abraham* 273 [LCL 289]).

obedience. Further, such trusting belief is celebrated in the Babylonian Talmud where Jews are described as ‘believers and descendants of believers’ (Shabbat 97a) and even gains meritorious significance in rabbinic theology where Abraham is cited as an exemplar once again:

Shema’yah says: ‘The faith with which their father Abraham believed in Me is deserving that I should divide the sea for them’. For it is said: ‘And he believed in the Lord’ (Gen 15:6). Abtalyon says: ‘The faith with which they believed in Me is deserving that I should divide the sea for them’. For it is said: ‘And the people believed’ (Ex 4:31) And so also you find that our father Abraham inherited both this world and the world beyond only as a reward for the faith with which he believed, as it is said: ‘And he believed in the Lord’, etc. (Gen 15:6). (Mekilta de Rabbi Ishmael on Exodus 14:15 and 14:31 [trans. J. Z. Lauterbach (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933)])

Retrospectively, Abraham serves not only as the archetypal Torah observer, but also monotheist. Notably, his exclusive allegiance to Yahweh, Israel’s God, although implied, is not made explicit in the earliest Pentateuchal sources. Later traditions associate Abraham’s departure from Haran and, by implication, the deities of his homeland in quest of the promised land as a movement from idolatry or polytheism to belief in one true God. This framing of the patriarch as a monotheist appears to be linked with the broader monotheizing reforms of the sixth century BCE reflected in the Deuteronomistic history (e.g. Joshua 24:2–4) which, judging from the book of Jubilees, was well established by the second century BCE (e.g. 11:14–17; 12:1–14). Further evidence of this growing commitment to monotheism is supplied by another re-telling of Israelite history, *Pseudo-Philo* or *Biblical Antiquities* (first century CE): ‘And when all those inhabiting the land were being led astray after their own devices, Abraham believed in me and was not led astray with them. And I rescued him from the flame and took him and brought him over all the land of Canaan and said to him in a vision, “To your seed I will give this land”’ (23.5 [OTP]). What is not so clear from these texts is whether they bear witness to an exclusive allegiance to one God, without denying the existence of other deities (e.g. monolatry or henotheism), or a thoroughgoing monotheism which excludes this possibility. On turning to Josephus and Philo, however, we find the latter position espoused:

He [Abraham] was thus the first boldly to declare that God, the creator of the universe, is one, and that, if any other being contributed aught to man’s welfare, each did so by His command and not in virtue of its own inherent power. (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 1.154–7 [LCL 242])

In this creed [pantheism] Abraham had been reared, and for a long time remained a Chaldean. Then opening the soul’s eye as though after profound sleep, and beginning to see the pure beam instead of the deep darkness, he

followed the ray and discerned what he had not beheld before, a charioteer and pilot presiding over the world and directing in safety his own work, assuming the charge and superintendence of that work and of all such parts of it as are worthy of the divine care. (Philo, *On Abraham* 70 [LCL 289])

Whether the Jewish Scriptures, when viewed diachronically, disclose an evolutionary process in which monotheistic Yahwism emerges from the polytheism of Canaanite religion or whether that same literature evidences a monotheizing tendency from the outset remains a matter of debate.⁸ What can be claimed with confidence is that Israelite identity increasingly becomes grounded in the conviction that Yahweh is the sole creator and sovereign of the universe who has elected and entered into covenant with a chosen people who, in response, are bound to offer their exclusive allegiance and devotion. Such a conviction is reflected, for example, in the daily recitation of the Shema⁹ and the lengthy prayer known as the Eighteen Benedictions.¹⁰ However, it is quite possible that the Nash Papyrus, dated to the second century BCE and containing the Hebrew text of the Decalogue and Shema, suggests that this practice has a considerably longer pedigree. Through exposure to different philosophical systems and religious traditions, Jewish belief in monotheism becomes absolute and is ascribed credal status as adumbrated in the Thirteen Principles of Maimonides (1135–1204 CE): ‘I believe with perfect faith (*’ani m’amin be’emunâh shelêmâh*) that the Creator, Blessed be His Name, is the Creator and Guide of everything that has been created; He alone has made, does make, and will make all things. I believe with perfect faith that the Creator, Blessed be His Name, is One, and that there is no unity in any manner like His, and that He alone is our God, who was, and is, and will be’.¹¹

Before drawing our review of faith in early Judaism to a close, it should be noted that Israelite religion was probably not the earliest incidence of

⁸ See Richard Bauckham, ‘Biblical Theology and the Problems of Monotheism’, in Craig Bartholomew et al. (eds.), *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004), 187–232.

⁹ ‘Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might’ (Deuteronomy 6:4–5). The rabbinic form included three scriptural passages (Deuteronomy 6:4–9; 11:13–21; Numbers 15:37–41) plus additional blessings. The twice-daily recitation is prescribed in the Mishnah (Berakoth 1.1–4) and may reflect a post-70 CE practice, although Jesus appears to have been familiar with Shema recitation (cf. Mark 12:28–34).

¹⁰ ‘You are praised, O Lord our God and God of our fathers . . . God Supreme, Creator of heaven and earth . . . Holy are You, and awe-inspiring is Your Name; and beside You there is no God’ (1, 3 [trans. Jakob Petuchowski, *The Lord’s Prayer and Jewish Liturgy* (London: Burns & Oates, 1978), 27–30]). Also known as the *Tefillah* or *Shemoneh Esreh*, the Eighteen Benedictions probably reached its final form in response to the rise of Christianity (cf. twelfth petition). As with the Shema, the Mishnah prescribes, in this case, thrice-daily recitation (Berakoth 4.1).

¹¹ Principles 1–2; trans. *The Authorised Daily Prayer Book of the United Hebrew Congregation of the Commonwealth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 154.

a monotheizing tendency. For instance, significantly earlier, a young Egyptian pharaoh, Amenophis IV (c. 1385 BCE), earned a reputation for demanding exclusive allegiance to the sun deity Aten to the extent that he eventually changed his name to Akhenaten. Whether his reforms reflect a thoroughgoing rejection of all permutations of polytheism remains a matter of debate, although some of the texts associated with him appear to point in that direction. For instance, the following excerpts from the Great Hymn to Aten are inscribed within the tomb of Ay, Tutankhamun's successor, in Amarna, a city built by Akhenaten:

O sole God who has no equal,
 thou didst create the earth after thy heart, thou alone,
 with people, cattle and all kind of game,
 all on earth that walk on legs,
 all in the sky that fly on wings,

Foreign countries, Canaan and Nubia,
 thou settest every man in his place,
 and createst what they need.
 Everybody has his food,
 his lifetime has been fixed . . .

Thou createst millions of forms from thyself, the One:
 cities and villages, fields, road and river . . .

Thou art the one who created when nothing was there,
 who created everything as it came forth from thy mouth.¹²

1.4 Faith in Christianity

During the first century CE, when Jewishness was increasingly becoming an ethnic identity inherited through birth, the Jesus movement was extending beyond that matrix to embrace non-Jews. Initially, this expansion precipitated a crisis over Christian identity which is addressed in a number of New Testament books, notably Acts, Romans and Galatians, whilst implied in others (e.g. Matthew, John, Hebrews). The apostle Paul, in particular, champions faith as the defining characteristic and appeals to Abraham for precedent and

¹² Trans. Johannes C. de Moor, *The Rise of Yahwism: The Roots of Israelite Monotheism* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1990), 43. De Moor discusses the monotheistic credentials of Atenism, as does James K. Hoffmeier, *Akhenaten and the Origins of Monotheism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015). On the origins of monotheism within Israelite religion, see Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

scriptural authority.¹³ In Romans 4, it is the patriarch's trusting faith, rather than Jewish identity markers such as circumcision and Torah observance, that forms the basis for his right-relating to God and, as such, he embodies the archetypal human response to divine grace: 'The purpose was to make him the ancestor of all who believe (*pan̄tōn tōn pisteuontōn*) without being circumcised and who thus have righteousness reckoned to them, and likewise the ancestor of the circumcised who are not only circumcised but who also follow the example of the faith (*tēs . . . pisteōs*) that our ancestor Abraham had before he was circumcised' (4:11–12). Paul develops a similar line of argument in Galatians 3 where he also, in what some scholars consider to be an exegetical sleight of hand, stresses how in Genesis 17, Yahweh's covenant was forged with Abraham and his seed in the singular (*sperma*), clearly a collective noun, before presenting Jesus Christ as that seed and means by which God would bring everyone into right relationship through faith:

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring; it does not say, 'And to offsprings', as of many; but it says, 'And to your offspring', that is, to one person, who is Christ . . . Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith (*ek pisteōs*). But now that faith (*tēs pisteōs*) has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian [i.e. the law], for in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith (*tēs pisteōs*). (3:16, 24–6)

As noted with respect to Judaism, the nature of faith is also explored in relation to Abraham in early Christianity. The previous paragraph emphasizes the trusting quality of faith, whereas the epistle of James stresses its behavioural expression which becomes a measure of faith's veracity:

Was not our ancestor Abraham justified by works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith (*hē pistis*) was active along with his works, and faith (*hē pistis*) was brought to completion by the works. Thus the scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God (*episteusen . . . tō theō*), and it was reckoned to him as righteousness', and he was called the friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone (*ek pisteōs monon*) . . . For just as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is also dead (*hē pistis chōris ergōn nekra estin*). (James 2:21–4, 26)

¹³ See Morgan, *Roman Faith*, 212–305. But note also the Fourth Gospel where faith as recognition and profession of Jesus' theological significance are stressed (e.g. 3:16–18; 6:35; 11:25–27) and where Jesus performs signs to engender it (e.g. 2:11; 11:47–48; 20:30–31). Authentic belief must perceive and affirm the true significance of these portents (cf. 12:37–40), to the extent that it is able to remain steadfast when exposed to personal scrutiny, challenging teaching or threatening circumstances (cf. 6:60–71; 9:1–38; 21:15–19). Again, see Morgan, *Roman Faith*, 394–443.

We also find that the patriarch becomes the guarantor of the credal content of faith. For example, according to the church historian Eusebius (263–339 CE), Abraham is the archetypal monotheist: ‘for it was by faith towards the Logos of God (*pistei . . . tou theou logon*), the Christ who had appeared to him, that he was justified, and gave up the superstition of his fathers, and his former erroneous life, and confessed the God who is over all to be one (*hena . . . ton . . . theon*)’ (*Ecclesiastical History* 1.4 [LCL 153]).

Interestingly, this brings into focus the uniquely Christian understanding of monotheism, namely its capacity for embracing distinct characterization, without divisibility, within divine essence.¹⁴ One of the passages regularly employed in early doctrinal development is Genesis 18, where Abraham and Sarah offer hospitality to three guests who appear as one. The phrase, ‘Abraham saw three, but worshipped only one’, usually attributed to Origen (184–253 CE), became a refrain in Christological formulation where, prefiguring the Incarnation, faith discerns the presence of Christ accompanied by a pair of supporting angels.¹⁵ Increasingly, though, this passage supplies biblical precedent for the Trinity as evidenced by the Christian rhetorician, Procopius of Gaza (465–528 CE): ‘Some take the three men as three angels; the Judaizers, however, say that one of the three is God, while the other two are angels; others still deem them to bear the type of the holy and consubstantial Trinity, who are addressed as “Lord” in the singular’.¹⁶

The Christian interpretation of this passage and imbuing of Abraham’s faith with Christian beliefs emphasizes the importance of orthodoxy or right-believing within the emerging church. Whilst Constantine’s decision to adopt Christianity as the official religion of the Roman Empire exerted considerable pressure upon bishops to agree on an official version, the importance of right-believing emerged much earlier and is evidenced in a number of New Testament books. For example, Paul defends his version of the Gospel against those promulgated by Judaizing Christian missionaries at Galatia (Galatians 1:6–9; 3:1–14; 5:2–15), whilst challenging factional behaviour on confessional grounds at Corinth (1 Corinthians 1.11–13). The author of the Pastoral Epistles places great emphasis upon ‘sound teaching’ and ‘soundness of

¹⁴ Bogdan G. Bucur draws attention to a partial parallel in Philo of Alexandria’s interpretation of Genesis 18 where God is accompanied by two powers, creative and kingly (*On Abraham* 121–2); see his ‘The Early Christian Reception of Genesis 18: From Theophany to Trinitarian Symbolism’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 23 (2015), 247.

¹⁵ E.g. Hilary of Poitiers (310–368 CE), *On the Trinity* 4.25, 27.

¹⁶ *Commentary of Genesis* 18 [Bucur]; however, Bucur also picks up an earlier trinitarian application in Augustine (354–430 CE), ‘Early Christian Reception’, 256–7.