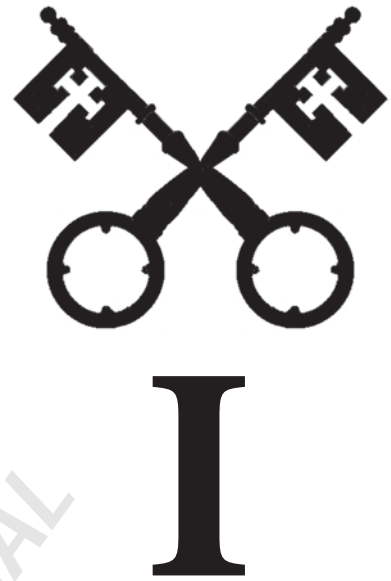


# SHARED CONCEPTS OF ANCIENT RELIGIONS



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**Conversion**

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

**Canon/Old Testament/  
Jewish Scriptures**

- Recognize the complete integration of religion and society in the ancient world.
- Become familiar with the shared religious views and rituals that benefitted the communities of the Roman Empire.

**Faith vs. Rituals**

**Church**

**“Spirit”**

**Polemic/Rhetoric**

## Concepts and Terminology

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**The Problem of  
Anachronism**

Before we begin, there are several concepts and terms that are utilized throughout the book. Listing them at the beginning helps to avoid repetition in each chapter.

**Creative Writing**

## Religion

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In the modern world, one’s identity is often categorized by a specific religion (Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, etc.). What we mean by this word is a “system of belief” that includes concepts, rituals, law and social codes. But in the ancient world, the concept of religion as a separate category did not exist in the sense that we understand it today. In fact, there was no word for religion in ancient Greek or Hebrew. The modern term, which came into use in the seventeenth century, derived from the Latin root, *religio*, sometimes translated as “those things that tie or bind one to the gods”.

All ancient peoples believed in the total integration of the **divine** (the gods, the powers in the heavens and under the earth), with humans and everyday life. If you stopped someone on the street and asked them what religion they practiced, they would have no idea what you were talking about. Instead, the question should be, “What customs do you live by?” The typical response would be, “The customs of our ancestors”. These customs were what identified people as **ethnic groups**, with a common ancestor, history, homeland, language, rituals, and mythology. All these elements were handed down by the gods and provided the basis for the governing authorities, the social construction of gender roles, and appropriate law-codes of behavior.

All ethnic groups shared common ideas and rituals concerning the divine, but there was no one authority to turn to; a concept such as the Vatican did not exist. If you had questions, you could consult a member of the **priesthood** (specialized experts), and you may receive different answers from different individuals. **Sacred Scriptures** varied from group to group and region to region. The closest concept such as our Bible was found in the works of Homer, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. Everyone in the Mediterranean Basin learned these stories, which included tales of constant interaction with the gods. Romans elevated their **foundation myths** as sacred (Romulus and Remus) as later told in Virgil’s *Aeneid* (first century BCE).

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## Polytheism and Monotheism

**Polytheism** (the belief in multiple deities), or sometimes **pantheism** (the belief in all powers) is always juxtaposed to **monotheism** (the belief in one god) understood as its polar opposite. However, the terms are problematic because they are modern. No one in the ancient world would identify with being a “polytheist”. More importantly, there was no such concept as “ancient monotheism”. *All ancient people were polytheists, including the Jews.*

In Western culture, monotheism specifically refers to the God of the Bible—the God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This is demonstrated by the fact that this God is always written with a capital “G”. It designates the God of Israel above all other gods, and assumes an element of faith. The God of Israel was simply one among the many thousands of deities that populated the universe. This text will continue to utilize the capitalization of God to differentiate this deity.

Ancient cultures viewed the universe on three levels: the heavens (the abode of the gods); the earth (the abode of humans); and the underworld, often referred to as “the land of the dead”. Gods could transcend, or travel around all three. Many groups had the concept of a **high god**, or a “king of the gods” who ruled over diverse gradients of divine powers. Lower divinities were called *daemons*, but eventually were seen as evil, and hence the popular word “demons”. Gods as well as demons could possess people. In the latter case, this was an ancient explanation of mental health issues and physical disabilities. There were many **exorcists**, or experts on expelling demons from people.

Like their neighbors, ancient Jews conceived of a hierarchy of powers in heaven: “sons of God” (Genesis 6), angels, archangels (the messengers from God who communicated God’s will), cherubim, and seraphim. Jews also recognized the existence of demons, and introduced the concept of a fallen angel who eventually became Satan, the Devil.

The foundational story for the idea that Jews were monotheistic was when Moses received the commandments of God on Mt. Sinai: “I am the Lord your God ... You shall have no other gods before me”. The Hebrew could be better understood as “no other gods *beside* me.” This does not indicate that other gods do not exist; it is a commandment that the Jews were not to **worship** any other gods. We combine “worship” with “belief” and “veneration”, but *worship in the ancient world always meant sacrifices*. Jews could pray to angels and other powers in heaven, but they were only to offer sacrifices (animals, vegetables, libations) to the God of Israel. This commandment was one of the major differences between Jews and all other traditional ethnic cults.

The Jewish texts consistently refer to the existence of the gods of the nations (ethnic groups): Deuteronomy 6:14 “Do not follow other gods”; 29:18 “to serve the gods of those nations”; 32:43 “Praise O heavens, his people, worship him all you gods!”; Isaiah 36:20 “who among all of the gods of these nations have saved their nations?”; and Psalm 82 “God presides in the great assembly; he renders judgment among the gods”. In the story of the Jews’ Exodus from Egypt, God battled against the gods of Egypt to demonstrate who controls nature. This

makes little sense if their existence was not recognized: "...I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt" (Exodus 12:12).

While Jews only offered sacrifices to the God of Israel, they shared a common conviction that all the gods should be respected; it was perilous to anger the other gods. Exodus 22:28 ordered the Jews never to revile the gods of the other nations. Early Christians accepted these levels of powers in heaven (and Hell) and the Apostle Paul often referred to the existence of the gods of the other nations in his letters. He berated "these powers" (*archons*) for interfering with his missions. Modern historians continue to debate the origins of a concept of "one god" in ancient Judaism. One theory placed it during the period when the Israelites adopted the Canaanite concept of the high god, El, into their views of Yahweh. Another theory claims that it was late, after the Babylonian captivity, adopting the high god, Marduk, in variations of Yahweh.

## Religion and Society

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The most dominating theme of all ancient cultures was that of fertility—fertility of crops, herds, and people. Without fertility, the clan/tribe did not survive. Thus, the gods were portrayed as male with a female consort or goddess. These pairs mated and produced offspring. (Judaism did not have this concept; the God of Israel had no consort.) "As in the heavens, so on earth"; ancient societies mirrored the heavenly realm by making the **family** the basic social unit. The family was an extended household which included parents, inlaws, children, slaves (and ex-slaves), business clients, and dead ancestors.

The way in which the family was promoted and validated was through extra-familial elements of society that were common to all regions of the Mediterranean basin. One's social class defined the parameters of status and rank, while **honor and shame** established the codes of ideal behavior for both individuals and the community. Honor was not just a private goal of an individual, but a public acknowledgment of one's worth or value to the community. A person with honor was one who adhered to social codes and conventions, and respected the gods. This trait was crucially important for one's public persona, or one's dignity and status in the community.

The **patron/client** system (how things got done) provided the network for relationships necessary for the common good, including relationships between humans and the gods. These extra-familial elements became encoded in the self-perception of all classes and levels of society, both free and slave, in social morals, and in one's relationship with the divine (cult). The upper classes had a religious duty to help the lower, and in return, the lower classes supplied food and crafts. Such obligations were given to the gods (through prayer and sacrifice) with the expectation that the gods would reciprocate with benefits to the person and the community.

## Social Class

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When we think of class in the modern world, we automatically think of economics: upper, middle, and lower classes. In the ancient world, economics was an important element of the social classes, but not necessarily the most important part;

blood trumped wealth. Our image of the upper and middle classes will usually include education, just as it did in the ancient world (although levels of education differed). But in ancient society slaves also had opportunities for education.

At the top of the social order was the aristocracy (“rule of the excellent”) where governing power resided in a small, privileged class who claimed descent from ancient, founding families. It was the bloodline that endowed nobility. Another class of males was equivalent to our middle or business class, where they engaged in manufacturing, trade, and banking. They could not claim the same kind of ancestry as the aristocracy, but they could and did accumulate wealth. Inter-marriage was permissible among the classes, with the tacit understanding that one should always “marry-up” to a higher class.

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## Slavery

Slavery in ancient Greece and Rome was not the same institution experienced in the ante-bellum South in the United States. Slavery was common throughout the ancient world, but it was not confined to one ethnic group or class; it consisted of all cultures and economic classes. Some educated Greeks sold themselves into slavery to work as *pedagogues* or tutors, and could thereby advance themselves. The beginning of the institution of slavery most likely began with war captives.

**Manumission**, the freeing of slaves, could occur if either the master paid over the price of the slave, or by the slave if he had saved enough money to buy his freedom. Particularly in Rome, domestic and commercial slaves were paid a minimum wage or sometimes given the management of a piece of property (*peculium*) that could be accumulated against their eventual manumission. Many slave owners, particularly businessmen, freed slaves and then set them up in business, where the freedman still retained a client’s obligation to his former master. In Greece, freedom did not include the right of citizenship, but in Rome citizenship was conferred with manumission. Roman freedmen could not hold public office or priesthoods, but they could vote, and their children were free citizens. The possibility of manumission (and change of social status) is one of the great differences between slavery in the ancient world and the ante-bellum South.

Mirrored as class levels in society, there were classes of slaves. At the top were the household slaves (tutors, hairdressers, maids, cooks) and at the bottom, prisoners of war, rebellious slaves, and convicted criminals. These latter were the ones punished with having to work in the tin, silver and copper mines of the provinces or row the galleys of the commercial ships.

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## Myth

We often use the word **myth** to automatically designate “something false”. In the study of religion, myths are ways in which people understand experiences with the divine, through stories, images, and metaphors. By their very nature, myths are not subject to verification. Myths are multivalent, meaning they are subject

to many different interpretations. Myths help to create a worldview to explain origins (where did we come from?) but more importantly, they help to validate the social order of the *contemporary* world. Myths function to explain the ideals and institutions of society, gender roles, and law-codes.

All religions have “origin myths”, set in primordial time that explain the beginning of the cosmos, gods, human beings, and sacred sites. The first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis are often described as “myth” in the sense that they explain origins. Myths utilize **etiologies** or explanations (e.g., the beginning of agriculture). Many of the towns and cities in the Mediterranean Basin had **foundation myths**, claiming a god or hero as their original ancestor.

Myths can be understood literally or as **allegory**, applied most often by the schools of philosophy and educated writers. They read myth as containing symbols that went beyond the basics to promote ideals or universals. Stories in the Bible were allegorically interpreted over the centuries by both Jewish and Christian writers.

## Acts of Worship/Rituals

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**Temples** were the homes of the gods on earth and were deemed **sacred space**. Unlike our modern places of worship, almost all the activity took place out of doors. This is where the **altar** was located, and people congregated around it. Because this was sacred space, one had to be in a state of **ritual purity** to enter and participate. “Ritual purity” is a state of being. Experiences of daily life, such as sexual intercourse and child-birth, rendered a person impure or “unclean” for a temporary amount of time before one could enter sacred space. These elements involved semen and blood, the two sources of life that were given by the gods and these moments were recognized as a suspension of normal activity. Another was the problem of **corpse contamination**. The dead ejected a miasma that was toxic, and had to be eliminated through certain rituals and time. Most purity rituals involved “washings”, but the concept is not necessarily related to hygiene.

Overseeing all aspects of worship were **priests** and **priestesses**. Their function was to ensure that worship was done correctly (according to the ancestral traditions). Some communities had a priest elevated above others, the **high-priest**. Unlike modern clergy, the priesthoods were not charged with caring for the souls of the congregation. Their first loyalty was caring for the god/goddess. A major difference with the priesthoods in the ancient world is that with few exceptions, they were part-time jobs. Priests and priestesses served in rotation (sometimes a week, sometimes a month). When they were finished with their term of service, they went back to their normal jobs or businesses. Conferring of a priesthood and the title were sought-out advantages for the ancients. Not only did this activity command respect, but it was an important element for one’s resume (the memory of a person), described on their funeral monuments.

Priests and priestesses oversaw the **rituals** (Latin, *ritus*, “doing things”) that included **sacrifices**, **prayers**, and **hymns** (prayers sung to music). The most important element of these rituals was that of sacrifices. Sacrifices were crucial to maintaining the balance between gods and humans. These were communal events directed to the welfare and prosperity of the group. Sacrifices had to be something of value, which in the ancient world was most often meat. Priests sacrificed sheep, goats, pigs, oxen, fowl, and wheat cakes if you could not afford an animal. Thousands of Temples had daily sacrifices. A portion of the animal was divided among the priests, and then the rest was distributed to the people. This is likely the only time that the poor were able to eat meat.

Another element of rituals was specific to marking heightened stages in life: birth, puberty, marriage, death. The modern term for these occasions, which were all celebrated through religious rituals, is **rites of passage** (some of which became the later Catholic **sacraments**).

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## Cult

We typically apply the term **cult** negatively to religious ideas that differ radically from the majority. In the ancient world, *cultus* (Latin, *colere*, “care or cultivate”) was a broad term for everything that was involved in the care and maintenance of the gods. This referred to the sacrificial knives, incense burners, and other implements of the rituals. *It did not indicate theology or spiritual differences*. In this text, we use “native” or “ethnic cults” as a category. Then as now criticism of someone else’s “cult” occurred often. We encounter this specifically in Christian criticism of Judaism and the native cults.

In modern sociological studies of religion, cult is part of an evolutionary process. There is a basic “mother religion”, but some members decide that reforms are needed. This becomes a **sect** within that system. Sects maintain the original concepts, but with updated reforms. (Think of the thousands of different denominations in modern Protestantism.) Later, the reformers may decide that more changes are needed, or new interpretations applied, and is deemed a cult. Ultimately, the group can break with the original mother religion as an independent faction. Christianity began as a sect within Judaism, became a cult in the Roman Empire, and eventually evolved into an independent religion.

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## Official Cults

Every village, town, and city in the Roman Empire had dozens of temples and shrines to both the **Olympian gods** as well as local gods. The government supported the worship of these gods, and added the state cults of Rome (the **Capitoline Trinity** of **Jupiter**, **Juno**, and **Minerva**). The first Emperor, Augustus,

instituted the **Imperial Cult**, to honor the royal family (see Chapter IV on Martyrdom). Participants had the freedom to join in the worship and festivals of all these deities in a concept known as **religious pluralism**. In other words, worshipping multiple deities was not understood as a conflict or contradiction.

## Voluntary Cults: The “Mysteries”

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Running parallel to the official cults of the Empire, was the option to participate in voluntary religious practices, usually limited to a group who had to undergo **initiation**. There was a public side to this worship, but initiates were able to gain secret knowledge. This knowledge took the form of how to achieve benefits in this world as well as the afterlife. They took a vow never to reveal the secrets, and thus, these practices were deemed the **Mysteries**. What these cults had in common was an emphasis on fertility, in the cycles of birth and re-birth. Many scholars have proposed the theory that Christianity modeled itself upon these various Mystery cults.

The most popular and Empire-wide cults were:

1. The Mysteries at Eleusis and Athens of the cult of **Demeter**. The festivals re-enacted her search for her daughter, Persephone, who had been abducted by Hades. Demeter was the goddess of grain and the seasons. During the search, the earth wilted and nothing grew (winter), but upon the reunion with her daughter, the crops arose again (spring and summer).
2. The cult of **Dionysius**, the god of fertility, the vine, and wine-making. The Cult of Dionysus was associated with the origins of drama and dance, and his festivals coincided with the presentation of plays in Athens and elsewhere. Apparently the wine-drinking led to a relaxation of the social conventions; both women and slaves were welcome to attend. The rituals also incorporated the ability to go into a trance, “letting-go” as it were and experiencing an out-of-body freedom. This was known as **catharsis**. The festivals became quite raucous at times, and became a target of Christian criticism. The original Greek word for “ritual” was *orgia*, **orgy**. This term became the most popular negative Christian description of all native cults, claiming polemic charges of sexual freedom at those festivals.
3. **Magna Mater** (The Great Mother, Cybele). This was an ancient religious cult, most likely originating from Anatolia (central Turkey) and introduced in Rome during the second Punic War (218–201 BCE). The cult re-enacted the myth of Cybele (a grain goddess) and Attis, her lover, a devotee, who went into an ecstatic trance (who was made “mad” by the goddess) and castrated himself. Cybele’s priests went into a trance-like state and castrated themselves in imitation of this devotion. Every year in Rome, the Megalesian games were celebrated by her eunuch priests and other initiates, dancing through the streets in ecstasy and self-flagellation.

4. The Cult of **Mithras**. Mithras was a Persian sun god who was eventually adopted by Rome, particularly by the legions. They had various degrees of initiation, somewhat like modern orders of the Masons. They met in underground chambers (*mithraea*) for communal meals and celebrated the death and re-birth of Mithras. Many of these chambers have been excavated throughout the Roman Empire. In late antiquity, the spread of this cult was one of the most competitive in relation to Christianity.

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## Religious Festivals

Throughout the Roman Empire, **religious festivals** were community events, either to honor a specific god or goddess or to honor a founding deity of the community. These festivals were also coordinated with **calendars**, or the marking of **sacred time** as well as the agricultural cycles. Festivals could last from one or two days to a week. Religious festivals consisted of three elements: sacrifices, drama, and games.

The many sacrifices throughout the city during festival time resulted in left-over quantities of meat and cakes, which were then distributed to the public. The myths of the gods were reenacted in plays during the same week. Athletic contests were added, the most popular of which were the chariot races. The combined events were labeled *ludi*, “games”. All these simultaneous events drew people into the city from the countryside. At the same time, they were occasions to honor **magistrates** (the governing personnel who paid for the games), and served as propaganda venues in the Empire.

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## Divination: Astrology, Oracles, Magicians

The way in which humans communicated with the gods, and the gods with humans, is generally described as **divination**. This was done through **astrologers, seers, oracles, prophets, augurs, haruspexes, wonder-workers, and necromancers**. Astrology (the study of the nature and power of the stars/planets) flourished, as the stars controlled people born under their influence. While many did not take this seriously, nevertheless, “just in case,” people often consulted experts who allegedly understood these powers. Knowing the time of one’s birth, these experts consulted “star-charts”, to determine which powers were dominant in your life.

Seers, oracles, and prophets went into an ecstatic trance and were “possessed” by a deity. The speech of the god was often in an unknown language, so a priest was usually required to translate. “Oracle” was the term for both the person as well as a place. There were hundreds of oracles sites throughout the Mediterranean Basin. One of the most famous oracles in the ancient world was

the oracle at Delphi, controlled by the god Apollo. For the most part, oracles were consulted to determine if a decision that was already made “pleased the god”. The **Prophets of Israel** were the Jewish version of oracles. When they spoke, it was the words of the God of Israel that were uttered.

Augurs in Rome adopted the ancient Etruscan methods of studying lightning and the flights of birds to determine good and bad omens. Haruspexes (also influenced by Etruscan rituals) were experts in examining the entrails of a sacrificial animal. If the entrails were bad or diseased, another animal had to replace it.

Wonder-workers were popular throughout the Empire. These were men (and sometimes women) who claimed special gifts that were granted by a god or goddess in relation to performing miracles. The result was physical cures for cripples, diseases, and the mentally ill. A common belief was that these problems were caused by demon-possession. Wonder-workers were expert **exorcists**, or those who “drove out” demons. Jesus of Nazareth fitted this traditional mold of a wonder-worker and exorcist.

Necromancers were experts in communicating with both the powers of the underworld (the land of the dead) as well as the ability to conjure up the dead. Unfortunately, in the Western tradition, wonder-workers and necromancers became grouped together under the term, “magicians”. The term derived from Persian court astrologers, deemed *magi* (as in the visitors at the nativity in Matthew). Because of their knowledge of the universe and astrology, it was believed that they were experts in being able to manipulate nature, for good or for ill. Thus our modern descriptions of “white” and “black” magic. This has influenced histories of the ancient world by assuming that “magic” was a unique and separate category.

When scholars describe these specific rituals, they use terms such as “spells” and “incantations”. But these “spells” and “incantations” were simply the same as prayers and hymns applied in all the rituals. The difference was in the fact that they often appealed to the powers of the underworld. These were known as the **cthonic** deities who required special rituals and sacrifices (black animals instead of white). There is a misconception that the powers of the underworld were all evil (influenced by later conceptions of Satan, the Devil). For example, Hecate was a beneficent goddess whose role was to accompany dead souls to a blessed afterlife. Through Christian polemic, these practices were deemed “superstition,” and these deities were demonized. Hecate became the “witch” of medieval Halloween practices.

## Ancient Concepts of the Afterlife

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Approximately 100,000 years ago, people began burying the dead with tools, weapons, decorated artifacts, and jars of food. Most scholars agree that these practices demonstrated a belief that there was another form of existence after

death; the grave items would be useful. Generally, a belief in an afterlife refers to specific beliefs that a person continues to exist in some form, either in a disembodied personal essence (soul) or a combination of soul with a new or reconstituted physical body. A belief in an afterlife also assumes a location for this existence outside the realm of earthly life. In connecting the ancient world to the modern, we find belief in an afterlife and funeral rituals to be one of the most conservative elements in history, changing very little over the centuries.

We do not know exactly when or why, but it apparently became difficult to believe that the human person (and personality) could simply be annihilated. In dreams, the dead appeared alive. The idea began to emerge that the dead still existed in some form, and that the dead resided in a separate place. Often deemed the netherworld or the underworld, this place was located under the earth and originally it was a neutral place—neither good nor bad.

The ancient Mesopotamians developed a pessimistic view of death and the underworld. In one of their myths, they claimed that the gods created death in order to control humans and control the population of the earth. In *Irkalla*, their “land of no return”, the dead suffered in agony, eating clay, and were eternally thirsty. Because they did exist, the dead could find ways to return to earth and either harm or help the living. Therefore, the dead spirits had to be placated with food and drink offerings.

In ancient Egypt, death was viewed more optimistically as another phase of the life cycle of birth, death, and re-birth. In the Old Kingdom (2600–2100 BCE) only the Pharaoh had access to an afterlife due to his nature as a living manifestation of divinity. By the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2000–1700 BCE) an afterlife was available to anyone who could afford the process (with mummification, funeral rites and ritual texts). This period also saw an increase in the popularity of the Osiris cult, particularly in his role as Lord and Judge of the Dead.

The emphasis on Osiris as Judge of the Dead was directly related to a new type of literature in the Middle Kingdom known collectively as **Admonition Texts**. Immediately preceding the Middle Kingdom, Egypt suffered a series of catastrophes, which may have included foreign invasion, plague, famine, and civil wars. Admonition texts were most often addressed by a father to a son and upheld the moral values of society. The child was admonished to lead a good and pious life and to avoid the pitfalls of evil deeds. Connected now to the Negative Confessions in Osiris’ Hall of Judgment, one’s deeds (and sins) in this life determined the type of existence in the next life. In these texts, we have some of the earliest indications that views of the afterlife reflect a social and historical context with elements of social justice.

It appears that there was a human need to believe that one’s life matters, either now or later, and that the imbalances of justice in this life would eventually be reconciled in the next one. Codes of acceptable social behavior and social justice went hand-in-hand with the evolution of detailed elements of the afterlife. The idea that good people are rewarded, and evil people are punished after death remains ingrained in the Western tradition.

## Ancient Judaism

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Jewish views of the afterlife evolved over time and in reaction to historical events. Initially, *She'ol* (the land of the dead) was a neutral area where all the dead resided. Heaven remained the domain of God and his angelic beings. Views began to change with the destruction of Jerusalem and Solomon's Temple in 586 BCE. The Prophets of Israel had claimed that God would intervene one more time in human history, and Israel would be restored to her former glory. At that time, a new kingdom would arise, a utopia-like Eden on earth, God's original plan. Included in this dynamic is a general resurrection of all the dead who would be judged.

During the period of exile and then Persian and Greek rule, Jews adopted the concept of the soul that was separate from the body. During the Greek and Roman occupations of Judea, apocalyptic literature detailed the glories of the rewards for righteousness and the tortures for the wicked in the afterlife.

## Ancient Greece and Rome

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The Greek underworld, or the place of the dead, was named after the Lord of the Underworld, the god **Hades**. The son of Cronus and Rhea, Hades was not the god of death (that was Thanatos), nor was he the equivalent of the Devil in the Western tradition. In Greek mythology Hades referred to both the place of the dead beneath the earth as well as places on the Western horizon. Although he was not an evil deity, nevertheless he was feared by humans as they feared the cruel inevitability of death. There were many cult sites in Greece and Italy that served as entrances to the underworld.

*Hermes Psychopompus* (guider of souls) led the dead to the river Styx which was the boundary marker for Hades. Hermes handed over the dead to Charon, the Ferryman. He ushered the dead into boats to cross the river for which he charged a fee. This consisted of a coin (*obolus*) that was placed in the mouth of the dead to ensure that Charon would take them across. If they did not cross (if they did not have the fee), they would remain in the liminal area between death and life, condemned to wander for eternity. Charon also served as a guardian to ensure that no one ever escaped from Hades except gods and heroes.

The dead were consigned to four areas, appropriate to the life of the person. The Elysian Fields was the place for heroes and great men. The Asphodel Fields held ordinary souls who did not commit any major crimes, but who also did not achieve fame and glory. The Fields of Punishment contained mythological characters who committed crimes or sacrilege against the gods. Tartarus, the lowest pits of Hades, was reserved for those we would call "the damned".

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## Greek and Roman Funerals

Once a person died there was a process involved which the survivors (family) were required to complete through rituals that would stabilize the flux or liminal state caused by death. There were three stages involved: (1) dying itself; (2) being dead but not yet disposed of; and (3) completion of the burial rites. Ideally, before dying a man should settle his affairs (by making a will), commit one's children (if young) to the care of others, and make the proper prayers for a safe passage to Hades. The soul left the body at the moment of death and sometimes lingered near the body. The son or the next of kin closed the eyes and placed the coin in the mouth for Charon.

The second stage required the laying out of the body (*prothesis*). Women washed the body and dressed it in a shroud or tunic. Soldiers were covered with their military cloak and if the deceased was a young, newly married woman, she was dressed in her wedding clothes. The dead body was displayed in the house where family and friends could pay their respects. Funeral lamentations were sung in both the home and the funeral procession.

The third stage, completion of the burial rites, included the funeral procession (*ekphora*) and the inhumation or cremation. Funeral processions were public events because they were important for the honor and status of the surviving family. They were so important that from the time of Solon's reforms (sixth century BCE) to the Imperial era in Rome, there was consistent legislation to limit the amount of money spent on funerals. Public display and feasts could be interpreted as currying favor with the voters. However, funerals for military heroes and some public figures continued to be lavish affairs in recognition of their service to the community.

The lamentations and demonstrations of grief that accompanied the procession were understood as a catharsis in its meaning of purification or cleansing of the emotions. The funeral oration, or the eulogy (*epitaphios logos*), if a notable figure, would be given in the public square and was considered the height of Greek oratory.

In ancient Greece, no priests or religious personnel were directly included in the funeral rites, although priests were available for consultation. At the cemetery the body was placed upon a pyre (cremation) or laid in the grave. Food offerings were brought and burned as a sacrifice in a nearby trench. Libations were poured on the pyre and wine was used to quench the ashes after the body was cremated. The bone fragments and ashes were then collected and placed in an urn which was buried in a grave. This was followed by a funeral feast either at graveside or at the house which was prepared by women.

Rome absorbed views of the afterlife and funeral rituals from the indigenous Italian tribes, the Etruscans and the Greek colonies in Magna Graecia. One of the major differences between Greek and Roman funerals is that Rome had what we would call a funeral industry that was subject to state regulation, much

like our modern equivalent of funeral homes. The business of death was under the auspices of both the state and the goddess *Venus Libitina*. *Libitina* may be Italian or Etruscan in origin, combining the aspects of a fertility and love goddess with a deity of the underworld. This aspect of the goddess Venus made sense to Romans because life and death were part of the never-ending cycle of existence. *Venus Libitina* symbolized the cessation of the life-force.

The *libitinarii* were trained priests who handled all aspects of death and funerals. *Libitinarii* were the first to be summoned to a dead body so that the necessary rituals could be performed to eliminate the danger. During the Republic one section of the Esquiline Hill was a public cemetery for the lower classes who could not afford a more expensive burial. Foreigners with no family, the very poor and slaves were buried collectively in grave-pits or *puticuli*. Dead animal carcasses from the streets were also dumped into these pits. The *puticuli* were kept open for easy access and public slaves most likely used lime to try to help stench the smell.

Both Greece and Rome established special religious holidays dedicated to dead ancestors, when it was believed that the dead roamed the earth during certain times of the year. Rituals evolved to both appease them (honor them), as well as rituals for sending them back to Hades.

## Funeral Games

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**Funeral games** were designed to honor and appease the dead and ensure a successful journey to the afterlife. Funeral games honored both the gods and ancestors and were combined with athletic contests. The model was taken from Homer's description of the funeral games that Achilles gave in honor of his friend Patroclus (the *Iliad*). Some of the earliest funeral games originated at Olympus and were performed every four years (**the Olympic Games**). The Etruscans (an ancient tribal people in Italy) developed specific funeral games that were ultimately adopted by Rome as **Gladiatorial Games**.

## Gentiles and Pagans (Problematic Terms)

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Thousands of native cults and religious associations dotted the landscape. One word cannot represent them all. What we have in the Bible is the Jewish point of view that identified themselves over and against all others. Translations of Bibles in English are somewhat tricky. In the Jewish Scriptures, all non-Jews are collectively identified as "the (other) nations", from the Hebrew, *goy* or *goyim* (plural). Depending upon the context of the passage, this term is sometimes translated as "stranger" or "foreigner".

In the New Testament, the word for “nations” is *ethnos*, referring to different ethnic communities. Through late Middle English (and through the King James Bible), the common translation became **Gentile** from the Latin *gens*, family or clan, for both *goy* and *ethnos*. “Gentile” simply means someone who was not Jewish and eventually someone who was not Christian.

However, a more popular term arose when Christians began to dominate and rule the Roman Empire. In the late fourth century *paganus*, **pagan**, became a derogatory term for people in the hinterlands who had not converted to Christianity (equivalent to “hillbillies,” or the uneducated). Many of the native cults focused on nature and fertility rituals. In the second century, the Church Fathers demonized these people, applying scathing reviews of their lifestyle and behavior that are still conjured up when we see the word “pagan”. This includes sexual orgies, drinking, and sometimes Satan worship. In this text “native” or “ethnic” cult is the term of choice, although you will find “pagan” in many of the Suggested Readings.

The inheritance of Biblical texts in Western culture provided the raw material for criticism of the native cults, beginning with the books of the Prophets. These writers continually railed against the worship of other gods as **idolatry** (the worship of icons, or images). Christians utilized these Prophetic texts in their literature, which contributed to the overall negative view of all non-Christians. The Prophets equated idolatry with “sexual immorality” and this became a dominant theme of Christian writers.

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## Conversion

**Conversion** means moving from one religious system to another. This word often appears in histories of ancient Judaism and early Christianity. People who participated in ethnic cults had the freedom to belong to several religious associations. They did not convert to another group by doing so. Ancient religion was in the blood; you were born into it as part of your clan or tribe. Conversion in the ancient world meant a change in lifestyle (one’s daily “customs”). Greeks and Romans who wanted to become a Jew fully converted in this sense.

The most famous convert in history was the Apostle Paul, and his “conversion on the road to Damascus”. However, this is a misnomer; at the time there was no Christian religious system to convert to. Paul himself described it as a “call” in the manner of the Prophets of Israel who were called by God for a specific mission.

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## Canon/Old Testament/Jewish Scriptures

You will often see the texts of the Bible referred to as the **canon** of Jewish texts and the four gospels as the **canonical gospels**. In Greek “canon” was a system of

measurement. Applied in this sense canon refers to those books that were “measured” in later decisions taken to determine which books would be listed as sacred scripture. The Jewish books (the first half of the Christian Bible) were canonized ca. 200 CE under the auspices of a Rabbi known as Judah the Prince. The documents that became the New Testament, the gospels, and the letters of Paul took several centuries to reach agreement on the canon and only began to be considered in a formal list under Constantine I (325 CE).

The designation “Old Testament” is a familiar one for the Jewish books. However, it is a Christian invention that is derogatory in nature. **Testament** is a later word for the older term of **covenant**. “Covenant” simply meant a contract between you and your people and your god(s). Christians in the second century began claiming that the older covenants with Israel were no longer valid and were replaced by the “new covenant” through Jesus. This idea is known today as **supersessionism** (that Judaism was superseded by Christianity), and still resonates as an element of modern anti-Semitism).

Naming the older books the “Old Testament” implies a judgment call. For Jews, these texts are not “old” in the sense that they are no longer valid. They remain at the center of Jewish belief and life. This textbook will use the term, **Jewish Scriptures** or “the Scriptures”, when referring to the various books of this collection. Some texts refer to the New Testament as the “Christian Scriptures”, but “New Testament” is the earlier descriptor. In the first century when Christian texts referred to “the Scriptures”, it was the Jewish Scriptures that they had in mind.

Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John are consistently designed the “canonical gospels”. This is out of place, as there was no concept of “canon” for these gospels in the first century. Between the first and third centuries there were dozens of other gospels that narrated different details and different interpretations of the teachings of Jesus. In the second century, the Church Fathers began a process of declaring which of these gospels contained “correct belief” (**orthodoxy**) and which were **heretical** (from the Greek, *haireisis* “a school of thought”). The term “canonical gospels” is relative to the later decision that included only these four gospels in the New Testament.

## Faith vs. Rituals

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Any text that examines the Bible, and especially the New Testament, will encounter the English word “**faith**” in translation. However, it was only in the eighteenth century that “faith” was used to describe “belief” in a religious system, particularly in teachings on individual salvation. At the same time, the word faith also came to mean belief in something despite evidence to the contrary. But the ancients did not often articulate their ideas as belief or faith as we understand it. “Faith” (derived from the Greek word, *pistis*) originally meant “loyalty,” in this case loyalty to a set of shared concepts and rituals involved in worship of a god or gods.

The great concern in the ancient world was to carry out rituals involved in the various native cults correctly. In ancient Rome, if a priest or augur stumbled over the words, he had to begin again. Several books in the Jewish Scriptures describe the correct way in which to perform the rituals of the Temple cult in Jerusalem.

Beginning with the New Testament, this focus on the rituals of non-Christians became a negative, derogatory way in which to attack both Jews and the native cults. Hence the modern concept that the Jews were “legalistic”, and were only concerned with “the letter of the Law”. The idea that native cults lacked “spirituality” (Christians had faith, pagans had rituals) still finds its biased way into many books on the early history of Christianity.

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## Church

In the New Testament, and particularly in the letters of Paul, you will encounter the word “church”. It is translated from the Greek *ecclesia*, which means “assembly”. The first missionaries apparently modeled their communities on the administrative structure of older Greek city-states and Roman towns, where the term referred to the assembly of free citizens who made up local government. In relation to the new groups of the followers of Jesus, a better translation would be “community”. Translating this as “church” conjures up images of church buildings and institutional hierarchy. Both were part of later Christian evolution. In the earlier communities there were no church buildings; people met in each other’s houses.

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## “Spirit”

Often mentioned in association with church activities, **spirit** is understood to be “the spirit of God” or “the spirit of Christ” (in Paul’s letters) and not the third element of the later concept of “The Trinity” (fourth century CE). This is the spirit of God that breathed life into Adam and “possessed the Prophets of Israel”. This is the spirit that came upon Jesus in the gospels at his baptism (the symbol of the dove) so that he was able to perform miracles and forgive sins. Christian English Bibles, reading back later Trinitarian concepts, always translate this with capitals, “Holy Spirit”.

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## Polemic/Rhetoric

**Polemic** is a verbal or written attack against an opponent, either real or imagined. **Rhetoric** is the art of persuasion, often calling upon figures of speech and stereotypes, and designed to convince an audience of one’s arguments or point

of view. (We are familiar with these terms in relation to contemporary politics and charges of “fake news” from both sides.)

Polemic and rhetoric are literary devices applied by all writers in the ancient world. In polemical writings, opponents may be named or constructed in what is known as “a straw man”. “Straw man” is the idea that the opponent’s arguments (as reported by the writer) are always shown to be wrong and thus defeated. Throughout the Jewish Scriptures and the New Testament, we have numerous examples of these literary devices. It was a favorite device of Jewish Prophets against idolatry and the gospels’ portraits of the Pharisees and the Sadducees and anyone who opposed Jesus. Christian writers continued to utilize these devices in their arguments against opponents. *But polemic and rhetoric are not historical evidence.*

## The Problem of Anachronism

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What is **anachronism**? It is placing something out of its own time and place, usually to a later time or place. The best way to understand this is the example of what are known as “gaffes” in Hollywood movies. It is like watching a movie that takes place in the 1970s but where people are using cellphones.

Anachronism is the bane of all historians. This is because we are modern humans. It is difficult to set aside our own experiences and knowledge so that we can be entirely objective. We expect objectivity from historians, but it is virtually impossible. All historians must decide what they think is important, and so you have immediate subjectivity in the selection. Knowing the end of a story always influences the past. For example, it is very difficult to write a history of World War II and ignore how it ended.

Historians of ancient Christianity do not escape this problem. Interpreting the literature of this period is quite a challenge. *We* know that these texts became the basis of a new, independent religion. *But the writers at the time did not know this.* Complicating our reconstructions is the fact that historians and theologians have 2000 years of Christian theology that is so often “read back” into the texts.

As a historian of ancient Christianity (I also research and teach the religions of Egypt, Greece, and Rome), I face the same struggles as other historians. I have attempted in every chapter to try and avoid such pitfalls where I can. I will often insert a modern analogy, simply to help with the reading and the reconstruction of early Christianity. You will be able to distinguish an analogy from anachronism.

## Creative Writing

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Modern analyses of Biblical literature are sometimes offensive to readers in their descriptions of ancient texts. Many historians conclude that a story was “made up”, but this is the way in which ancient writers went about their craft.

Historians such as Herodotus, Polybius, and Livy, for example, were aware of “manuals” that provided the rules. You were expected to “make up speeches.” In a speech by a general before the troops were sent into battle, no one “took notes.” Moses was alone when he received the commandments on Mt. Sinai. Instead, the writer created a speech that highlighted the known characteristics of a general or a leader. He was then judged on how well the speech fit the character and the occasion. Both the writers/editors of the Jewish Scriptures as well as the New Testament utilized this device. This is especially true in the hundreds of speeches in Luke’s Acts of the Apostles.

Perhaps a better way in which to explain this type of writing is found in the modern category known as “creative nonfiction”. Creative nonfiction portrays real people and events, but with material added for dramatic effect. Creative nonfiction is employed by poets, playwrights, and screenwriters. In film biographies, speeches are added to highlight the meaning behind an event or to indicate what the person was thinking. We have the same process in ancient literature.

For brief history of the Roman Empire, see **Appendix I**.

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## Summary

- The Roman Empire contained hundreds of native cults that originated with ancestral traditions.
- Religion and society were fully integrated into everyday life to achieve the survival of each community.

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## Suggestions for Further Reading

- Denova, Rebecca I. 2019. *The Religions of Greece and Rome*. Wiley-Blackwell. This textbook surveys and compares the origins and practice of the religions of Greece and Rome.
- Mikalson, Jon D. 2009. *Ancient Greek Religion*. Wiley-Blackwell. Mikalson includes analysis of Greek myths and literature in the practical applications of Greek religion.
- Warrior, Valerie M. 2006. *Roman Religion*. Cambridge University Press. This is an anthology of the literature and mythology of Roman religion.

