

SHARED  
CONCEPTS OF  
ANCIENT  
CULTURES AND  
RELIGIONS



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After reading this chapter you will be able to:

- Recognize the complete integration of religion and society in antiquity;
- Become familiar with the shared religious views and rituals that benefited the communities of the ancient world.

## Concepts and Terminology

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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.

## 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 codes, 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.”

## The Universe

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Ancient cultures shared a three-tiered concept of the universe:

1. The **Heavens** (above), the realm of the **divine**. This was the abode of the all the gods, characterized by descending gradients of importance and relative to their functions in the physical world, such as originators or protectors of agriculture or craftsmanship. Many groups had the concept of a “**high god**,” or a “king of the gods,” who ruled over diverse gradients of divine powers. The lowest levels of divinity, *daemons* in Greek, eventually came to be blamed for the exigencies of evil in life, the demons.
2. The Earth: the abode of humans, animals, and plants (the realm of physical matter).
3. The underworld, the netherworld, the “land of the dead.” Initially a neutral area, later concepts developed for special areas for the wicked and righteous dead.

All ancient peoples believed in the total integration of the divine with humans and everyday life, from the moment you woke to your dreams at night. 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, passed on through the blood of the generations. Ethnic groups shared a common ancestor or founder, 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.

There was also no ancient concept of **race** as we now understand and define it (through the disciplines of Anthropology and Physiology). Fully aware of ethnic differences in skin color, facial structure, and hair, this was defined along the lines of geography and social class. There were notable differences among the people of the Middle East, Italy, Gaul and Germania, Italy, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa. But the differences were aligned with the climates of these regions (the sunlight). Darker skin usually indicated lower social classes; these people worked outdoors, in the fields.

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 opposite. However, the terms are problematic because they are modern. No one in the ancient world would identify with being a polytheist. The term was utilized to describe temples and shrines that held more than one image of the gods (*poly*). More importantly, there was no such concept as ancient monotheism. *All ancient people were polytheists in a sense, 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.

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 Mount Sinai: “I am the Lord your God . . . You shall have no other gods before me.” This does not indicate that other gods do not exist; it was a commandment that eventually became understood that the Jews were not to worship any other gods. We combine “worship” with “belief” and “veneration” (modern terms), 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 82:1 “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 Paul often referred to the existence of the gods of the other nations in his letters. But he berated “these powers” (*archons*) because they were powerful enough to interfere with his missions.

## Myth

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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, as they occur in “mythic time.” 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 origins 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.

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## The Concept of Sin

Sin in the ancient world was understood as a violation of the dictates and law codes given by the gods and passed down through the ancestors. The laws applied to individuals as well as the community. Retribution or punishment for an individual or a group's violation was often extended to explain events and sufferings of the community, such as earthquakes, famine, plagues, and loss in a battle. There were various rituals and offerings to undo such violations and to restore the relationship between humans and the divine.

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## Acts of Worship/Rituals

Ways in which to undo such violations became foundational in the evolution of worship and rituals. **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 childbirth, rendered a person impure or unclean for a temporary amount of time before one could enter a 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 of one's legacy (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**).

## Cult

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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 entity. Christianity began as a sect within Judaism, became a cult in the Roman Empire, and eventually evolved into an independent religion.

## Official Cults

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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. 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 Roman 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 rebirth. The most popular and empire-wide cults were:

1. The Mysteries at Eleusis and Athens in 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 (think of Mardi Gras and “carnival” seasons in Venice and Rio). 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 later 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 polemical charges of sexual abandon at those festivals.
3. The **cults of Isis and Osiris**. Perhaps the oldest of all the mysteries, the Cult of **Isis and Osiris** originated in ancient Egypt. Osiris was understood as one of the oldest and greatest of the Pharaohs who was married to his sister, Isis. Their jealous brother, Seth, dismembered his body and buried the parts all over Egypt. Isis searched for all the body parts; she found everything except the penis, which she then magically created and “resurrected” Osiris from the dead. She became pregnant before Osiris was then translated to be the “Lord of the Dead” in the underworld.

Their son, Horus, became understood as the manifestation of both in a falcon-headed god, and present in all subsequent pharaohs. When the Greeks conquered Egypt, Ptolemy Soter I merged Greek and Egyptian concepts into a new god, Serapis. Understood as a version of Hades, he was also a god of grain, worshipped in temples known as **Serapeums**. By the time of the early Roman Empire, Isis temples and Serapeums were popular all over the Mediterranean Basin (including Pompeii and Rome). Isis, the goddess of civilized cities, sexuality, motherhood, and the afterlife, then took on added elements; she was popular for the safety of sailors.

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 rebirth 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.

Many scholars have proposed the theory that Christianity modeled itself on these various Mystery cults. Like the Mysteries, Christians required a three-year period of initiation for converts. In the traditional view of the triumph of Christianity, one of the reasons was the evidence of what appeared to be an increased interest in the Mysteries beginning in the Hellenistic period and through the duration of the Roman Empire. This renewed interest was accredited to the anxiety of paganism, and the fears of the afterlife, which Christianity guaranteed.

However, the Mysteries were in fact ancient. The reasons for the renewed interest may have stemmed from many factors and not necessarily a religious crisis of some kind. We have evidence of increased travel during the Imperial period (especially among the elite). The Roman advocate Cicero wrote about his travel to Eleusis and his participation as an initiate in the first century BCE, encouraging other Romans to make the trip.

## Religious Festivals

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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: temple 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 re-enacted 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.

## Divination: Astrology, Oracles, Magicians

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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, haruspices, 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. By knowing the time of one’s birth, these experts consulted “star-charts” to determine which powers were dominant in a person’s 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 oracle 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. Haruspices (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 Roman 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 fit 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 evil. 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 **chthonic** 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 after-life. Through Christian polemic, these practices were deemed “superstition,” and these deities were demonized. Hecate became the “witch” of medieval Halloween practices.

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## Religion and Society

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, in-laws, children, slaves (and ex-slaves), business clients, and dead ancestors.

Gender roles were defined by their importance in fertility. A man’s duty was to procreate for the good of the city-state and empire. The role of women was found in their basic contribution of serving as incubators for the fetus. Women had no official social or political power. However, particularly in Rome, we have literary evidence of many women who stepped beyond this role in the late empire. Aristocratic Christian women also went beyond traditional roles to contribute to their communities.

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

(the Latin *dignitas*). 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 worth 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 was more important than 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 to improve your family's social standing.

## Education

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Historians often estimate the level of education at 1–5% among the upper classes. This is what we term formal education, which consisted of histories, Homer, the myths, classical drama, and various schools of philosophy. An element of the elite, formal education required leisure and money, sources not available to the rest of the population. The upper classes utilized pedagogues (tutors), most often educated slaves, who lived with the family and were honored members of the household. Many cities had public libraries with borrowing privileges.

However, education in this sense is different than literacy. Both boys and girls were taught the basics of reading and writing, either in the home or in organized schools. This included literature, especially Homer and the classic myths and history. Especially among the business classes, basic reading and math was essential. That basic literacy existed is attested by the many inscriptions on statues and buildings, and government edicts of the Senate were posted

after each session. The dozens of examples of graffiti (many having to do with campaign promises during elections), would have been pointless if most of the public could not read.

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## Collegia

*Collegia* were official trade guilds, burial clubs, and commercial associations. There were also *collegia* of the priesthoods of Rome.

All these groups met under the supervision of a god or goddess. There were regular, monthly meetings where members' dues paid for the food and drink. However, these groups had to have the official sanction of the Roman Senate to be able to assemble, rather like a license. The senate (and provincial magistrates) could revoke a group's license, usually during times of political instability. This occurred quite often in the last stages of the Roman Republic; groups meeting (and drinking) in private had the potential to plot insurrection. The late Republic saw street gangs (headquartered in *collegia*) backing individual candidates which resulted in mob violence. For three hundred years, Christian leaders appealed without success to the Roman government to be granted a license to assemble. It was only granted by an edict of Emperor Constantine in 313 CE.

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## Slavery

Slavery in the ancient world was not the same institution experienced in the antebellum 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 antebellum South.

Mirrored as class levels in society, there were classes of slaves. At the top were the household slaves (tutors, hairdressers, maids, cooks) who became trusted members of the family. At the bottom were prisoners of war, rebellious slaves, and convicted criminals. These last ones 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. What has not survived in the literature is a concept of any particular god or goddess that was worshipped by slaves. Most commonly slaves took on the gods of their masters; in sculpture and inscriptions, slaves are portrayed as helping in the carrying out of sacrifices and rituals.

## 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 assumed 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. An important concept developed known as “**ancestor worship**.” As the ancestors still existed in some form, they had the power to either help or harm their descendants and had to be placated.

Initially, no one died and went to Heaven; that was the abode of the gods. It is in the Middle Kingdom of ancient Egypt that new concepts emerged in literature known as “Admonition Texts” (ca. 2000 BCE). Often written by a pharaoh to a successor or a father to son, it is some of the earliest literature that claimed that one’s deeds in life determined one’s afterlife. After death, good people would exist in a field of reeds, Egyptian life without pain or sorrow, or be consigned to the *du’at*, where one’s memory was totally annihilated. This concept of reward and punishment spread throughout the ancient Mediterranean world. Later Greek concepts evolved stories of famous heroes whose deeds helped them to achieve a separate status, either among the gods or a special place in **Hades**, such as Herakles/Hercules (**hero cults**). Truly evil dead were consigned to the lowest area of Hades, **Tartarus**.

## Monism/Dualism

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Scholars use the terms **monism** and **dualism** to describe changing views of the afterlife. The ancients did not need Newton to explain gravity; heavy, physical bodies could not ascend on a cloud. The earliest texts promote the concept of monism (one unit), that the person consists

of a physical body only, but with what we may describe as a personality that distinguished someone from their neighbor. The influence of the schools of philosophy promoted the idea of dualism (two units) of the person, a physical body and a nonphysical essence, the soul. The body was subject to decay at death, but the soul could be freed to ascend to a blessed afterlife (in eventual Christian belief, Heaven).

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## Funeral Rituals

Funeral rituals evolved in conjunction with literature describing the afterlife. Funeral rituals became necessary both to help the individual complete the journey to the afterlife and to keep the person there. Simultaneously, both Greece and Rome had created certain times of the year when ancestors roamed the earth for a day or two (days of the dead). This was combined with honoring the dead ancestors and praising their past lives. Rituals were then required to send them back to the land of the dead.

Funeral monuments (tombstones) became important and listed the great achievements of a person to ensure their memory. Memory, literally “carved in stone,” ensured that your existence continued through yearly anniversaries when families returned to celebrate one’s life at the graveside.

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## Funeral Games

**Funeral games** were designed to honor and appease the dead and ensure a successful existence in 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 **gladiator games**.

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## The Terms: Judaism, Jews, Christianity, Christians

Increased study of ancient systems of meaning (religion) recognizes that neither Judaism nor Christianity existed in a modern, systematic sense. Biblical texts contain changes and editing over time as historical contexts changed. In earlier books of the Jewish Scriptures, those who adhered to the God of Israel were described as “Israelites” and “Hebrews” depending on the source, particular language, and dating. Many scholars utilize “Israelite religion” as a descriptor of the earlier traditions as distinct from the later, centralized authority of the Temple in Jerusalem (515 BCE–70 CE). After the destruction of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by the

Assyrians (722 BCE), a group in the north who were not taken into exile coalesced around Mount Gerizim with their own temple and were known as **Samaritans**.

The term, Jew was a later designation from the Persian period (ca. 550 BCE), *yehudi*, “someone from the Southern Kingdom of Judah,” named after Jacob’s son, the tribe of Judah. The Greek and Latin renderings of *ioudaios*, *iudaeus*, became the common translation of “Jews.” However, the complication is that these terms could simultaneously describe people from Judea (the later Roman name for the province) and could refer to everything from geography to a particular lifestyle to political views and historical traditions. *It did not always indicate religious or theological concepts.*

## Jewish-Christians and Gentile-Christians

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Ferdinand Christian Baur (1792–1860) was a German theologian at the Tubingen School of Theology who utilized Hegel’s dialectic theory to claim that early Christianity was a synthesis: **Jewish-Christians** (assigned to Peter or Petrine traditions) and **Gentile-Christians** (Paul’s communities). The terms are scholarly constructions and are not found in Paul’s letters.

Historically, the labels for “Jewish-Christians” and “Gentile-Christians” assumed distinct differences within the groups. This results in projecting a defined dichotomy between Paul and Jerusalem (Peter and James), between Paul and all other Jews. Baur’s concepts have been challenged by many modern scholars. However, the modern adjectives of conservative and liberal continue to be utilized as descriptors of these two groups. But such adjectives reinforce the historical bias against Judaism as strict and oppressing, while liberal Christianity was inclusive and universal. The modern analogy is found in categorizing political groups as right-wing and left-wing. But in all probability (then as now), such groups contained diverse concepts and practices as well as shared convictions which we can no longer recover.

## Languages/Scriptures

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Hebrew was the language of ancient Israel. The Assyrians and Babylonians shared a semitic language that became part of the later Syrian dialect, **Aramaic**. Aramaic became the “common tongue” in Israel. When Alexander conquered areas of the Middle East (330 BCE), Greek became the lingua franca in those regions. In the Western Empire, Latin was dominant, but the empire retained both Greek and Latin languages.

One of Alexander’s generals, Ptolemy I Soter (323–283 BCE), organized the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek for the community of Jews in Alexandria. According to the tradition, he brought in seventy scribes from Jerusalem and housed them while they completed their work. This Greek version became the **Septuagint** (“translations of the seventy”), and was the version utilized by both Paul and the writers of the gospels. Translation differences occur in moving from Greek to Latin. The Church Father Jerome (342–420) translated the Hebrew Scriptures and the Greek New Testament into Latin. This produced

the most popular version of the Bible in the Middle Ages, in the *vulgar*, “common tongue” of Latin, the Vulgate Bible. Through Middle English, the King James Version of the Bible utilized Latinized versions of the Greek.

A version known as *koine* Greek was the common dialect. It was a form of Greek based upon Attic and Ionian vernaculars. The higher literary forms were known (through the writings of Homer, poets, literature, and dramatists), but *koine* Greek was the common language of trade and travelers. In modern parlance, we would call this “the Greek spoken in the streets.” This shared language provided Paul with the ability to address his different geographic communities as well as class levels, from Asia Province (Turkey) to cities in northern Greece and Macedonia.

Research on Paul often includes a discipline known as philology, the study of the historical development and relationship of languages. Translations will often differ on specific Greek concepts or words, some of which remain open to debate. In those cases, we will discuss the ones that affect the analysis of what we think Paul had in mind. In this textbook, we use the New International Version of the New Testament, unless indicated.

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## Old Testament/Canon

The designation Old Testament is a familiar Christian designation for the Jewish books of scripture. However, it was a Christian term that was 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.

Naming the older books, the Old Testament was a detrimental concept. For modern 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.

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 referred to those books that were measured in later decisions taken to determine which books would be considered 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).

Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John are consistently designated as 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, *haeresis*, “a school of thought”). The term canonical gospels is relative to the later decision that included only these four gospels in the New Testament.

## Gentiles and Pagans

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In the Jewish Scriptures, the Hebrew for *goy* (plural, *goyim*) was the term for foreigner or stranger. In Greek versions, 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. Thousands of native cults and religious associations existed throughout the Roman Empire. One word cannot represent them all.

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 a slur against 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. Hollywood continues to promote this view of ancient society. Native or ethnic cult is the proper term of choice, although pagan or ex-pagan is a more convenient understanding.

## Faith versus Rituals

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Any text that examines the New Testament will notice the English word **faith** in translation. Paul is often credited with introducing faith as a new religious concept. The Greek term is *pistis*, “loyalty,” meaning loyalty to the dictates of the gods; for Paul, loyalty to God’s commandments and his views. From the Latin *fides*, “trust in something,” fidelity, by the eighteenth century, faith became joined to belief, particularly for 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. The great concern was to carry out rituals involved in the various native cults correctly. Several books in the Jewish Scriptures describe the correct way in which to perform the rituals of the Temple cult in Jerusalem. In ancient Rome, if a priest or augur stumbled over the words, he had to begin again.

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 claim that the Jews were legalistic and were only concerned with the letter of the Law. The idea that native cults lacked spirituality (Christians have faith, pagans have rituals) still finds its biased way into many books on the early history of Christianity.

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## Creative Writing

**Creative writing** is a modern term for creative nonfiction. Creative nonfiction portrays real people and events, but with material added for dramatic effect. The added material usually includes psychological elements and what people were thinking. Creative nonfiction is employed by poets, playwrights, and screenwriters. Modern analyses of ancient and biblical literature are sometimes offensive to readers in their analyses of the stories. Many historians conclude that a story was “made up,” but this is a convenient term for 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 Mount Sinai. When Jesus prayed the night before his death at Gethsemane, he had to keep waking up the disciples who had fallen asleep three times. Instead, a writer created speeches 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. The writers/editors of both the Jewish Scriptures and the New Testament utilized this device.

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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.