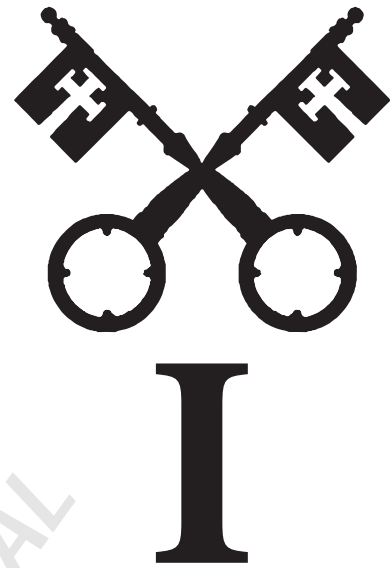


SHARED CONCEPTS OF CULTURE AND RELIGION



Concepts and Terminology

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The Universe

**Religious Pluralism and
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Monism/Dualism

Funeral Rituals

Death in the Name of God: Martyrs and Martyrdom in the Western Tradition,
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Funeral Games

After reading this chapter you will be able to:

**Judaism/Jews, Christianity/
Christians, Islam/Muslims**

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

Languages/Scriptures

Polemic and Rhetoric

Old Testament/Canon

Gentiles and Pagans

Faith versus Rituals

Creative Writing

Concepts and Terminology

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

Religion

In the modern world, one's identity is often categorized by adherence to a specific **religion** (Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, etc.). What we mean by this word is a "system of belief" that includes concepts of the divine powers of the universe, law codes, rituals, social codes of behavior, and gender roles. 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*, coined by the Roman advocate Cicero (106–43 BCE), as "those things that tie or bind one to the gods."

The Universe

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

- 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 systems had the concept of a **high god**, or a "king of the gods," who ruled over diverse powers. The lowest levels of divinity, the demons or *daemons* in Greek, originally neutral, eventually came to be blamed for the exigencies of evil in life.
- The Earth. The abode of humans, animals, and plants, distinguished from the divine as consisting of physical matter.
- The underworld, the netherworld, the "land of the dead" for humans. Initially a neutral area, later concepts developed special areas for the righteous and wicked 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 in 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. Ancients were born into religious systems. Ethnic groups shared a common ancestor or founder, language, history, homeland, religious rituals, and mythology. All these elements were handed down by the gods and provided the basis for the governing authorities.

There was also no ancient concept of race as we now understand and define it through the disciplines of anthropology and physiology. Although people were fully aware of ethnic differences in skin color, facial structure, and hair, these were defined along the lines of geography and social class. There were notable differences among the people from the northern climates, the Italian Alps, Gaul and Germania, and those of the Middle East, North Africa, and sub-Saharan Africa. But the differences were also aligned with social class. The rich had access to cosmetics that could protect them from the sun. Darker skin usually indicated lower social classes; these people worked outdoors, in the fields.

Religious Pluralism and Conversion

The ancient world is noted for its **religious pluralism**; people could fully participate in various native cults that promoted some gods over others without contradiction. Nor did this simultaneous activity require **conversion**. Our modern concept of religious conversion is understood as changing from one system of religious belief to another. In the absence of systematic theology in the ancient world, conversion in the ancient world meant changing one’s inherent customs and lifestyles. The best example of the concept of conversion was when someone from a native cult wanted to become a Jew. Judaism had unique, physical identity markers of circumcision and different dietary laws.

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 later Vatican did not exist. If you had questions, you could consult a member of the **priesthood** (specialized experts), although you could receive different answers from different individuals. **Sacred scriptures** varied from group to group and region to region. The closest concept to the Christian 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), with earlier traditions retold in Virgil’s *Aeneid* (first century BCE).

Polytheism and Monotheism

Polytheism (the belief in multiple deities), or sometimes **pantheism** (the belief in all powers), is always juxtaposed with **monotheism** (the belief in one god), understood in polar opposition. However, the terms are problematic because they are modern. No one in the ancient world would have identified 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 modern monotheism in the ancient world, including among the Jews.

In Western culture, monotheism specifically refers to the God of Israel—the God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This is demonstrated by the fact that this God is always written with a capital “G.” This 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), archangels, angels (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.” This does not indicate that other gods do not exist; it was a commandment 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 the traditional ethnic cults. The Jewish word for the native cults was **idolatry**, the worship of idols (Greek *icons*), “images.” This was a collective, negative description of non-Jews. Participants in native cults never identified as “idolators.”

The Jewish texts consistently refer to the existence of the gods of the nations (Greek *ethnos*, ethnic groups), which were created by the God of Israel: 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 or

revile the gods. Early Christians accepted these levels of powers in Heaven, and Paul often referred to the existence of the gods of the other nations in his letters. But he sometimes berated these powers (*archons*) because they were powerful enough to interfere with his missions.

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 of the divine, through stories, images, **allegory**, and **metaphor**. These literary devices were most often applied by the schools of philosophy and educated writers, who 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 Jews, Christians, and Muslims.

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 the beginning of the universe, the creation of gods, humans, and the physical materiality of Earth. While arising in mythic time, their purpose is to validate the contemporary world. In other words, myths are rationalizations of why and how societies function in relation to the gods and each other. The first 11 chapters of the book of Genesis are often described as myth in the sense that they explain origins. Myths utilize **etiologies**, causation, or explanations (e.g., for words or the beginning of cities or agriculture).

The Concept of Sin

A **sin** in the ancient world was understood as a violation of the dictates and law codes given by the gods. The laws applied to individuals as well as the community. Retribution or punishment for an individual’s or a group’s violation was often utilized to explain events and sufferings of the individuals and the community, such as earthquakes, famines, plagues, and losses in battle. There were various rituals and offerings to undo such violations and to restore the relationship between humans and the divine.

Acts of Worship/Rituals

Ways to appease the gods and to rectify 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, around which people congregated. Because the temple itself was sacred space, one had to be in a state of **ritual purity** to enter it 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 he/she 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 concept 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 washing, 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, those in the priesthood were not charged with caring for the souls of the congregation; their first loyalty was caring for the god/goddess. A major difference in the priesthood in the ancient world is that with few exceptions, these were part-time jobs. Priests and priestesses served in rotation (sometimes for a week, sometimes for a month). When they had finished 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), inscribed on one’s funeral monument.

Priests and priestesses oversaw the **rituals** (Latin *ritus*, “doing things”), which included **sacrifices**, **prayers**, and **hymns** (prayers sung to music). The most important element of these rituals was sacrifices, which 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 often meat. Priests sacrificed sheep, goats, pigs, oxen, fowl, and wheat cakes if the person 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

We typically apply the term **cult** negatively to religious ideas that differ radically from the majority. In the ancient world, *cultus* (derived from the Latin *colere*, “care or cultivate”) was a broad term for everything that was involved in the care

and maintenance of the gods. It referred to 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 Jewish, Christian, and Islamic criticism of each other and the native cults.

Sectarianism

In modern sociological studies of religion we observe 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, most often in changes of authority or governance. (Think of the 65,000 denominations in modern Protestantism.) Later, the reformers may decide that more changes are needed, or new interpretations applied, and it is deemed a cult. Ultimately, the group can break with the original mother religion as an independent system or new system.

Christianity began as a sect within Judaism, became a cult in the Roman Empire, and eventually evolved into an independent religion. Islam began as a reform movement to fully explain and reinterpret the foundational elements of both Judaism and Christianity. Islam then became a fully independent, new religion.

Official Cults

Every village, town, and city in the Roman Empire had dozens of temples and shrines to older, local gods and then added the Olympian gods of Greece. Rome also added ancient Italian deities that aligned with the Olympians. Deemed "official cults," these were standard for what was deemed "good citizenship" in the empire.

Voluntary Cults: The Mysteries

Running parallel to the official cults 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 more advanced knowledge. This knowledge took the form of how to achieve benefits in this world as well as the afterlife. Initiates 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, the cycles of birth and rebirth.

Religious Festivals

Throughout the ancient world, **religious festivals** were community events, to honor either a specific god or goddess or 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 quantities of leftover meat and cakes, which were then distributed to the public who feasted at communal tables. 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 in the Roman Empire 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 authorities who paid for the games) and served as propaganda venues in the empire.

Divination: Astrology, Oracles, Magicians

The way in which humans communicated with the gods, and the gods with humans, was 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. Stars and planets were identified as deities and elevated heroes and controlled the fate of people born under their influence. Knowing the time of one’s birth, these experts consulted star charts to determine which powers were dominant in one’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 the 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 had already been made pleased the gods. 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 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 the disabled, the diseased, 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.

From the Latin *miraculam*, “a wonder,” a **miracle** is defined as an extraordinary event, beyond human efforts and thus assigned to the intervention of a supernatural or divine power. Miracles in the ancient world were understood as the reversal of a negative problem or event. It is impossible to verify actual miracles in the ancient world, but scholars analyze miracle stories with the consensus that, true or not, everyone believed in them.

Necromancers were experts in communicating with the powers of the **underworld** (the land of the dead) as well as having the ability to conjure up the dead. Unfortunately, in the Western tradition wonder-workers and necromancers became grouped together under the term **magicians**. This term derived from Persian court astrologers, deemed *magi* (as in the visitors to 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 the forces of nature, for good or for ill; hence our modern descriptions of white and black magic. The assumption that magic was a unique and separate category has influenced histories of the ancient world.

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. The latter are described by the modern term **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 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.

Religion and Society

The most dominating concern of all ancient cultures was 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 created through speaking, with 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 that included parents, in-laws, children, slaves (and ex-slaves, freedmen/women), business clients, and dead ancestors.

Gender roles were defined by their importance in fertility. A man’s religious duty was to procreate for the good of the city-state and empire. The role of women was their sole contribution of serving as an incubator for the fetus. In theory, women had no political voice and no control of their social status beyond

procreation. However, we have many cases of women opening defying the conventional standards.

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 (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 reputation in the community. The polar opposite was shame. The male and father of the family was in control of the extended family and everyone's behavior. If his wife committed adultery, it meant he lost control and was diminished in his social standing.

The **patron/client** system (how things got done) provided the network for relationships necessary for the common good, including relationships between humans and gods. These extrafamilial 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

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, who 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. Intermarriage was permissible among the classes, with the tacit understanding that one should always marry up to a higher class to improve one's family's social standing.

Citizenship

Free males were given citizenship, the right to vote in the city assemblies for various levels of magistrates, and the right to judge, to sit on panels for juries. Citizenship was a privilege, not only conferring a higher social status but understood as one's duty to the community. In Rome and the provinces, voting was organized by descent from ancient tribes. Not everyone could make the trip to Rome or to other cities from the countryside. The votes were not counted as individual decisions but tallied as a bloc of an individual tribe.

Education

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 for the elite, formal education required leisure and money, resources not available to the rest of the population. The upper classes utilized **pedagogues** (tutors), 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 from basic literacy. Both boys and girls were taught the basics of reading and writing, either in the home or in organized schools. This included some tales of literature, especially Homer and the classic myths and history. Especially among the business classes, literacy was required as well as the essentials of mathematics. That basic literacy existed is attested by the many inscriptions on statues and buildings, and the government edicts of the Senate that 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.

Collegia

Collegia were official trade guilds 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. Some *collegia* were established as funeral clubs. Members fees were held against their death, when their friends would meet for a funeral feast, somewhat like having funeral insurance.

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; men meeting (and drinking) in private had the potential to plot insurrection. The late Republic saw street gangs (headquartered in *collegia*) backing individual candidates for consul, which resulted in mob violence. For 3,000 years Christian leaders appealed to the Roman government to be granted a license to assemble, but without success. It was only granted by the co-Emperors Constantine and Licinius in the Edict of Milan in 313 CE.

Slavery

Slavery in the ancient world 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 or to a race; it consisted of all cultures and economic classes. Some educated Greeks sold themselves into slavery to work as pedagogues 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 either if the master paid over the price of the slave, or if the slave had saved enough money to buy his/her 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 their slaves and then set them up in business, where the freedman or freedwoman 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 a priesthood, 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 in the ante-bellum South.

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

Ancient Concepts of the Afterlife

Thousands of 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 a specific belief that a person continues to exist in some form, either in a disembodied personal essence (soul) or a combination of a 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 among 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 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 they 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.

In the following chapters, we will see the ways in which the emergence of concepts of martyrdom was directly related to existence in the afterlife. The **martyr's** ability to affect the community and confer benefits was achieved in his/her transformation after death.

Monism/Dualism

Scholars use the terms **monism** and **dualism** to describe changing views of both the person and the afterlife. The ancients did not need Isaac Newton to explain gravity; heavy, physical bodies could not ascend on a cloud. In our earliest texts, with the exception of very few, people did not die and “go to Heaven.” The person was understood as one unit (monism), a physical body but with what we can describe as a personality that distinguished him/her. The influence of some ancient civilizations and the later schools of philosophy promoted the idea of dualism (“two aspects”) of the person: a physical body and a nonphysical essence, the soul. The physical body was subject to decay at death, but the soul could be freed to experience either a blessed afterlife or suffering in the land of the dead.

Funeral Rituals

Funeral rituals at first involved the practical problem of burying or cremating dead bodies. Rituals then emerged both to help the individual complete the journey to the afterlife and to keep the dead in their place. Simultaneously, it was believed that during certain times of the year ancestors emerged from the dead and roamed the Earth. Rituals were required to appease them and send them back to the land of the dead.

Funeral monuments (tombstones) became important and listed the great achievements of a person to ensure his/her memory. Memory, literally “carved in stone,” ensured that one’s existence continued through yearly anniversaries when families and communities reunited to celebrate one’s life at the graveside. At the same time, these permanent monuments indicated to the community that the family had done their proper duty to honor the dead, which enhanced their reputation and standing in the community.

Funeral Games

Funeral games were designed to honor and appease the dead and ensure a successful existence in the afterlife. Funeral games honored both 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 (in the *Iliad*). Some of the earliest funeral games originated at Olympus and were performed every four years (the **Olympic Games**). The Etruscans (an ancient people in Italy) developed specific funeral games that were ultimately adopted by Rome as **gladiatorial games**.

Judaism/Jews, Christianity/Christians, Islam/Muslims

In the Jewish scriptures, the Hebrew *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 meant someone who was not Jewish and later someone who was not a Christian.

Ancient manuscripts can be difficult to interpret in relation to religion. A description of someone as Greek could indicate someone who lived under Greek rule. But it could also be someone who shared traditional concepts of the gods but performed the rituals in the “Greek manner.” Similarly, a Roman could be someone living in Rome or a Roman province or someone who followed the religious traditions and rituals of worship of Rome.

The term “Jew” was a later designation of the Persian period (c. 550 BCE), from *yehudi*, “someone from the Southern Kingdom of Judah,” the tribe of Judah, named after Jacob’s son. The Greek and Latin renderings of *ioudaios* and *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.

When the followers of Jesus of Nazareth took his message to the cities of the eastern empire in the first century, Gentiles (from the “nations,” the native cults) wanted to join the movement. Both Paul and Luke (in the Acts of the Apostles) reported a meeting in Jerusalem to decide whether these new believers first had to adopt the identity markers of Jews (circumcision and dietary laws). Modern scholars have designated those who advocated full conversion **Jewish Christians**. Those who opposed this view were labeled **Gentile Christians**. These terms do not appear in the New Testament.

Similarly, Paul never used the term “Christians,” as in the middle of the first century there was no concept of Christianity as a separate system from Judaism. It was in the Acts of the Apostles that we first have the term *christianoī*, “followers of the Christ” (in Greek *christos*, “anointed one,” from the Hebrew for “messiah”), applied to these believers.

When Muhammad introduced his new understanding in seventh-century Arabia, we have the term **Islam**, “submission to the will of God,” and **Muslim**, “one who submits.” Then as now, not all believers were of Arab descent, but included many groups of older tribal and religious cults and traditions of the region.

Languages/Scriptures

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 as a whole retained both Greek and Latin languages.

One of Alexander’s generals, Ptolemy I Soter (323–283 BCE), organized translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek for the community of Jews in Alexandria. This Greek version became the **Septuagint** (“translations of the 70”) and was the translation utilized by Paul, the writers of the gospels, and the second-century church bishops.

A version known as **koine Greek** was the common dialect. It was a form of Greek based on 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 convey his teachings in regions of Macedonia, Asia Province (the former Anatolia), and islands of the Mediterranean.

The Church Father Jerome (342–420 CE) translated the Hebrew scriptures and the Greek New Testament into Latin. This produced the most popular version of the Bible in the Middle Ages, the Vulgate Bible in vulgar Latin, the “common tongue.” Through Middle English, the King James Version of the Bible utilized Latinized versions of the Greek.

Arabic is a Semitic language group, the common language of some tribes of Arabia, c. 2,500 years old. Arabia also contained various tribal language groups. However, Arabic became elevated as the dominant language. The Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad in Arabic by an angel. The Arabic of the Qur'an is considered the most perfect form of the language.

Polemical and Rhetoric

Polemical is a written or verbal attack against a real or a perceived person or a difference of opinion. Polemical calls on stereotypes and stock figures that are familiar to its audiences. It was a literary device applied by all writers in the ancient world and continues in modern times. Polemical is a device to distinguish one's views from others, or the views of a group from the dominant culture. It utilizes a concept known as a "straw man," created by the writer sometimes in the form of a dialogue. These views are then juxtaposed to those of the writer through the art of **rhetoric**, training in persuasive speaking or writing, utilizing tropes or figures of speech. Anyone trained as an advocate (to work in the law courts) utilized these elements to argue case law.

Polemical and rhetoric rarely offered facts or historical evidence. Polemical and rhetoric against one's opponents always began with charging the opponent or group with "sexual immorality" (without details), the "love of money," "neglect of the dictates of the gods," or acts of treason against the contemporary ruling body or government. However, the nuances of polemical and rhetoric are often misunderstood as they did not always lead to outright rejection. Criticism was also a way in which to argue not full rejection but a new interpretation of traditional views.

Old Testament/Canon

The "Old Testament" is a familiar Christian designation for the Jewish books of the scriptures. **Testament** is the English word for the older term **covenant**, which simply meant a contract between you and your people and your god(s). Christians in the second century claimed that God sent Christ into the world to establish a "new covenant," negating the older one with the Jews.

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 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. In the first century when Christian texts referred to the scriptures, it was the Jewish scriptures they had in mind. Some texts refer to the New Testament as the "Christian Scriptures," but "New Testament" is the earlier descriptor.

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 concept of measurement. Applied in this sense, it 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 c. 200 CE under the auspices of a rabbi known as Judah the Prince. It took several centuries to reach agreement on the canon containing the documents that became the New Testament, the gospels and the letters of Paul, and these only began to be considered in a formal list under Constantine I (325 CE).

Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John are consistently described 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 **heresy** (from the Greek *haíresis*, “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

A 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 “country bumpkins” or the uneducated). Many of the native cults focused on nature and fertility rituals. In the second century, the Church Fathers demonized people who followed them, 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. Islamic texts utilized the concept of pagan, but with later translations in English that became “infidel.”

Faith versus Rituals

Any text that examines the New Testament will note the English word **faith** in the translation. Paul is often credited with introducing faith as a new religious concept. The Greek term was actually *pistis*, “loyalty,” meaning loyalty to the

dictates of the gods; for Paul, loyalty to the commandments of the God of Israel and his views. In the King James version we have fidelity, from the Latin *fides*, “trust in something.” By the eighteenth century, “faith” had become 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.

Yet the ancients did not often articulate their ideas as belief or faith as we understand it. Their great concern was to carry out the 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 start again.

Beginning with the New Testament, this focus on the rituals of non-Christians became a negative, derogatory way to attack both Jews and the native cults. Roman religious sacrifices were articulated as practical and contractual, beginning on the principle of *do ut des*, “I give that you might give.” This led to the claim that Jews and pagans 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.

Creative Writing

Modern analyses of ancient religious and biblical literature are sometimes offensive to modern readers in their analyses of the stories. Many historians conclude that a story was “made up,” but this is simply a convenient way to describe how ancient writers went about their craft. Historians such as Herodotus, Polybius, and Livy, for example, were aware of manuals that provided the rules. Speeches were created by the writers.

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. When Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane to be spared his upcoming trials and torture, he had to wake the disciples three times because they kept falling asleep. All ancient writers 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.

Perhaps a better way 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. Poets, playwrights, and screenwriters employ creative nonfiction. 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.

Summary

- The ancient world 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.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Johnston, S.I. (2007). *Ancient Religions*. Belknap Press. This is an anthology of scholars' detailed examinations of shared concepts in the ancient world outlined in this chapter.

Salzman, M.R. and Sweeney, M.A. (2019). *The Cambridge History of Religions in the Ancient World: Volume I, From the Bronze Age to the Hellenistic Age*. Cambridge University Press. Structured as encyclopedia articles, literary concepts are analyzed through archaeological evidence.