

# 11

## CHAPTER

# ANCESTORS OF THE WEST



© RAHIB HOSSEINI / Reuters / Corbis

The region surrounding the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea is commonly referred to as the cradle of the West. Here were born the religious beliefs and practices from which Judaism, Christianity, and Islam would eventually emerge. This chapter presents some of the religious aspects of early Western civilization. We have to be selective, because the religious traditions of the ancient West were numerous and diverse, and they endured for ages.

We will examine the traditions of Iran, Greece, and Rome for two reasons. First, they include a variety of the beliefs and practices typical in the ancient West, such as polytheism (belief in many gods) and rituals of animal sacrifice. Second, these traditions had a strong influence on the emergence of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. We will note many familiar features of these traditions that have been carried to modern times. Still it is important to remember that these religions are not of value merely because of their



influences on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. They are significant subjects of study in their own right. In addition, the religion of ancient Iran—Zoroastrianism—is still alive today.

## RELIGION IN ANCIENT IRAN: ZOROASTRIANISM

Zoroastrianism is one of the world's oldest living religions. It arose and flourished in ancient Iran, which was known as Persia. Its present followers number only about 100,000, mainly the Parsis (Persians) of India.

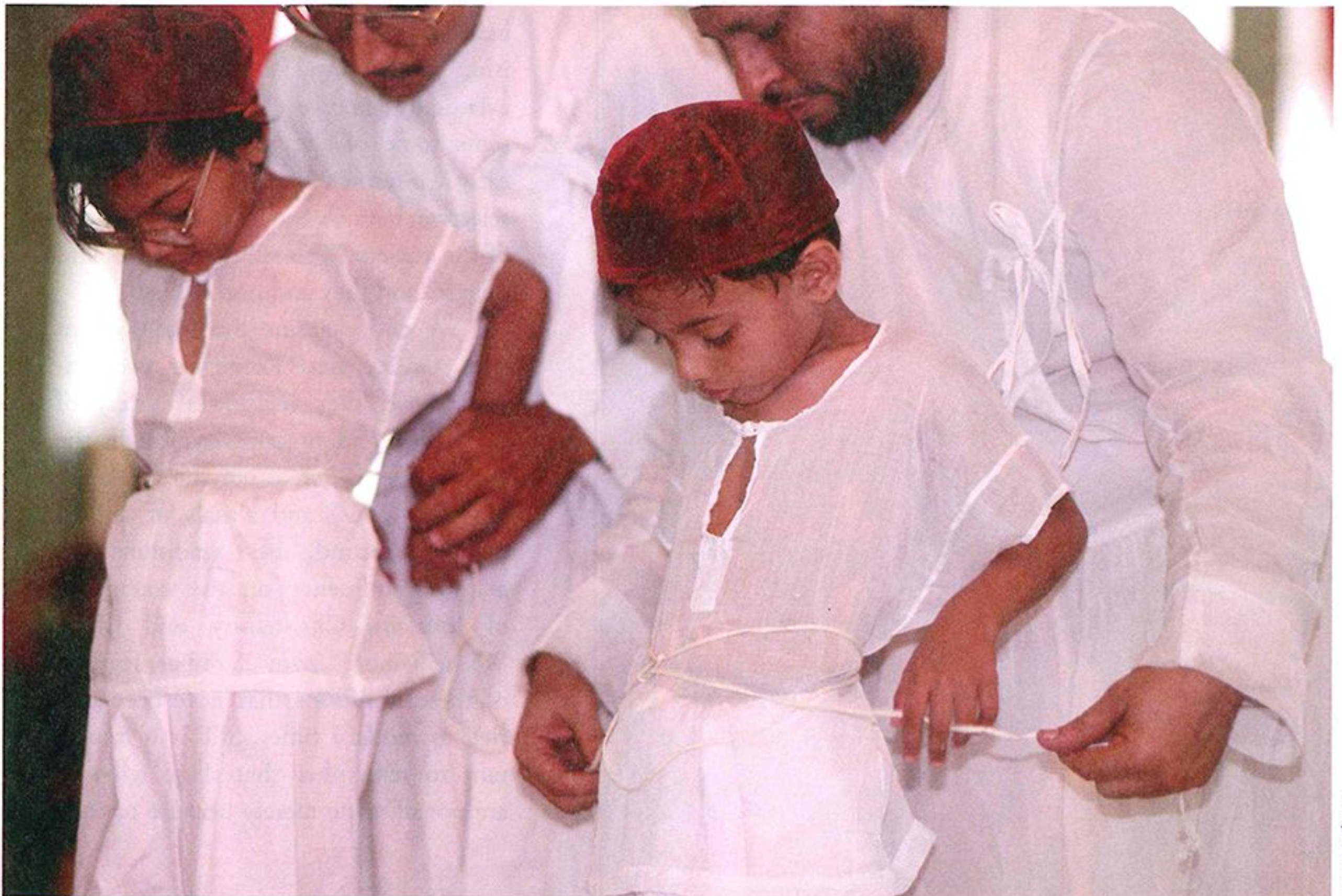
Zoroastrianism has undergone a number of major changes since the time of its founder, Zarathustra (called Zoroaster by the Greeks). This ongoing transformation has amounted to an incredibly diverse tradition

with different features at different times. Let us begin by looking at Zarathustra and the Zoroastrianism of ancient times, when the religion exerted great influence on the formation of Judaism and Christianity. A list of the religious innovations of Zarathustra and the early Zoroastrians is both impressive and familiar: judgment of the soul after death, followed by an afterlife of heaven or hell; a universe pervaded by forces of both good and evil; and monotheism.

### The Origins and Early Development of Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism originated in an area now occupied by the nations of Iran and Afghanistan. Although we do not know for certain when Zarathustra lived, it was most likely during the sixth or fifth century BC.

Today Zoroastrianism is practiced mainly by the Parsis of India. Here Parsi priests lead boys in a Zoroastrian ritual.



© Lindsay Heston / Corbis



According to Persian tradition, he was born in 660 BC.

Zoroastrianism began to flourish throughout Iran during the Persian Empire, which was at the height of its power and influence in the fifth and fourth centuries BC. The Jews who remained in Babylon after having been forced into exile there (from 587 to 538 BC) lived in direct contact with the Persians who had gained control of the region. After Persia was conquered by the Greek general Alexander the Great in 328 BC, aspects of Persian culture, including Zoroastrianism, spread far and wide.

### The Life of Zarathustra

Zarathustra's life story is shrouded in mystery. He seems to have been a son of a priest in a rural area. The traditional religion of Iran at this time was polytheistic, and a close relative of Hinduism. Zarathustra eventually initiated a large-scale religious conversion from polytheism to monotheism.

Legend has it that when Zarathustra was about thirty years old, he had an astonishing religious experience. An angel called Good Thought appeared to him and brought him, as a disembodied soul, before **Ahura Mazda** (ah'hoo-reh maz'dah), the Wise Lord. Zarathustra recognized Ahura Mazda as the one true God. After this experience, Zarathustra went around preaching the radical message of monotheism to his polytheistic society. With the help of a king who had converted to Zoroastrianism, Zarathustra overcame hostile opposition and firmly established his religion. He is said to have died at the age of seventy-seven.

Although Zarathustra's life story is legendary, his teachings are verifiable. His seventeen hymns, or **Gathas** (gah'thuhs), are the oldest part of the sacred text of Zoroastrianism, the **Avesta** (a-ves'tuh). Altogether the Avesta is a diverse set of writings spanning a

period of perhaps one thousand years. In the Gathas, we can observe Zarathustra's innovative religious ideas.

### Ahura Mazda, the One God of Zarathustra

Monotheism is a notion so familiar today that its uniqueness can pass unnoticed. But in the polytheistic society of ancient Iran, Zarathustra's innovation was truly radical and courageous. The same can be said of the monotheism of the Hebrews (the ancestors of the Jews). We do not know whether Zarathustra and the ancient Hebrews influenced each other's thinking on this issue. In any event, the monotheism of both religions was a remarkable departure from the norm of the ancient world.

For Zarathustra the one true God was Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord. Ahura Mazda is eternal and universal goodness, controlling the cosmos and the destiny of human beings. In the following passages from the Gathas, Zarathustra celebrates Ahura Mazda's role as creator:

Who is by generation the Father of Right, at the first? Who determined the path of sun and stars? Who is it by whom the moon waxes and wanes again? . . .

Who upheld the earth beneath and the firmament from falling? Who the water and the plants? Who yoked swiftness to winds and clouds? . . .

What artist made light and darkness? What artist made sleep and waking? Who made morning, noon, and night, that call the understanding man to his duty? . . .

I strive to recognise by these things thee, O Mazdah, creator of all things through the holy spirit.

(44.3–7)

### Ahura Mazda (ah'hoo-reh maz'dah)

The Wise Lord, the one true God worshipped by Zarathustra and later by Zoroastrians.

### Gathas (gah'thuhs)

Seventeen hymns attributed to Zarathustra that constitute the oldest and most important portion of the Avesta.

### Avesta (a-ves'tuh)

The sacred text of Zoroastrianism, which includes the very old hymns known as the Gathas, along with more recent material.





A relief sculpture of Ahura Mazda stands among the ruins of Persepolis in Iran.



## ACTIVITY

Review the Gathas passage on Ahura Mazda. To what extent does this strike you as a familiar description of God?

### Choosing between Good and Evil: Ethical Dualism

**Ethical dualism**, the belief in universal forces of good and evil, is Zoroastrianism's most distinctive feature. In Zarathustra's theology, the one God, Ahura Mazda, who is universal goodness, is opposed by the Lie, depicted by Zarathustra as an evil, cosmic force.

With this approach, Zarathustra offered a straightforward solution to the problem of evil: evil really exists and manifests itself in

the world. On the other hand, the belief in a cosmic force of evil challenges monotheism. For if evil really exists, is Ahura Mazda, who is perfect goodness, truly the only God? Similar questions always challenge monotheistic theology, whatever the religion. Zarathustra's theology of good and evil attempted to answer those questions.

According to Zarathustra, Ahura Mazda had twin children, a beneficent spirit and a hostile spirit. (The hostile spirit later came to be known by the name Shaitan, which is related to the Hebrew name Satan.) Because both were born of Ahura Mazda, even the hostile spirit was not essentially evil. But both were free to choose between the forces of good and evil. The beneficent spirit chose truth, and the hostile spirit chose the Lie, the evil force.

For Zarathustra, the universe was a cosmic battleground of good and evil forces, depicted as angels and demons (the demons were identified as the many gods of Iranian polytheism). This belief had a major influence on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Zarathustra believed this cosmic battle would eventually be won by the good, angelic forces. He hinted at the doctrine of a future savior who would come to help restore goodness to the world. This doctrine was richly elaborated by later Zoroastrians, and it also seems to have influenced Judaism and its belief in the coming of a messiah.

This cosmic scheme of good and evil is crucial for human beings. For while the world awaits the ultimate triumph of goodness, humans must choose between truth and the Lie, between the beneficent spirit and the hostile spirit. Each person's choice has eternal consequences. In the Gathas, Zarathustra states the matter this way:

Hear with your ears the best things.  
Reflect with clear purpose, each man



for himself, on the two choices for decision, being alert indeed to declare yourselves for Him before the great requital. Truly there are two primal Spirits, twins renowned to be in conflict. In thought and word, in act they are two: the better and the bad. And those who act well have chosen rightly between these two, not so the evildoers. And when these two Spirits first came together they created life and not-life, and how at the end Worst Existence shall be for the wicked, but (the House of) Best Purpose for the just man.

(30.2–4)

This passage shows how the dualism of Zoroastrianism unites ethics with human destiny. At the “great requital,” or day of judgment, the wicked will suffer the pains of “Worst Existence” (hell), while the just will enjoy the “House of Best Purpose” (heaven). Humans determine their own destiny by choosing either truth, goodness, and life, or falsehood, evil, and “not-life.” This ethical dualism is the basis of Zoroastrianism.



## ACTIVITY

Does the Zoroastrian explanation for the existence of evil account for the evil you have experienced and observed? Why or why not?

### Human Destiny

Zoroastrianism’s doctrines regarding human destiny—resurrection and judgment of the dead, and vivid portrayals of heaven and hell—are among its most important and influential features. Zarathustra’s own understanding of human destiny seems to have been as follows:

Shortly after death, individuals undergo judgment. This requires crossing the Bridge of the Separator, which goes over an abyss of horrible torment but leads to paradise. The ethical records of individuals are read and judged. The good are allowed to enter paradise, while the evil are cast down to the abyss. In the

### ethical dualism

The belief in universal forces of good and evil; Zoroastrianism’s most distinctive feature.



A king receives his crown directly from Ahura Mazda in this relief sculpture from Iran.





Ruins of an ancient Zoroastrian temple.

Gathas, Zarathustra emphasizes the individual responsibility for failing to pass the judgment:

Their own soul and their own self shall torment them when they come where the Bridge of the Separator is, to all time dwellers in the House of the Lie.

(46.11)

Zoroastrians also believe in a final bodily resurrection of everyone, good and evil alike. Once resurrected all will undergo a test by fire and molten metal; the evil will burn, while the good will pass through unharmed. It is not clear whether Zarathustra himself believed in resurrection, or if this belief developed later. We therefore do not know if Zoroastrianism's doctrine of resurrection was adopted by Judaism or vice versa.

In any event, many aspects of the early Zoroastrian perspective on human destiny, such as descriptions of heaven and hell, were adopted by other religions. Heaven, or the

House of Best Purpose, is said to be forever in sunshine, and its inhabitants enjoy the company of the saved. Hell, the Worst Existence, is a foul-smelling, dark place where the tormented are forced to remain completely alone.



## ACTIVITY

Fire is often used as a symbol. Recall several ways you have seen fire used as such. Then think about what fire represents for you personally. How does this relate to what fire represented for the Zoroastrians?

## Zoroastrian Life: Ethics and Worship

The traditional life of Zoroastrianism is centered on agriculture. Its ethical demands include such principles as caring for livestock and fields. Generally one is to lead a simple life, always telling the truth and doing what is right. Great care should be taken to avoid those on the side of evil, the followers of the demons for whom the Lie prevails.

Worship practices include prayer, which is to be done five times a day. (This seems to have influenced Islam, which sets forth a similar requirement.) The most famous form of Zoroastrian worship is the fire ritual. Fire is a symbol of the purity of Ahura Mazda. In the fire ritual, Zoroastrians worship not fire itself, but rather Ahura Mazda's perfect purity. This ritual has always been central to Zoroastrian worship. According to tradition, Zarathustra himself was killed while tending the sacred fire.

Modern Zoroastrians continue to emphasize the fire ritual. A fire burns continually within the inner sanctuary of a temple. The priests who tend the fire are extremely careful to maintain ritual purity, covering their



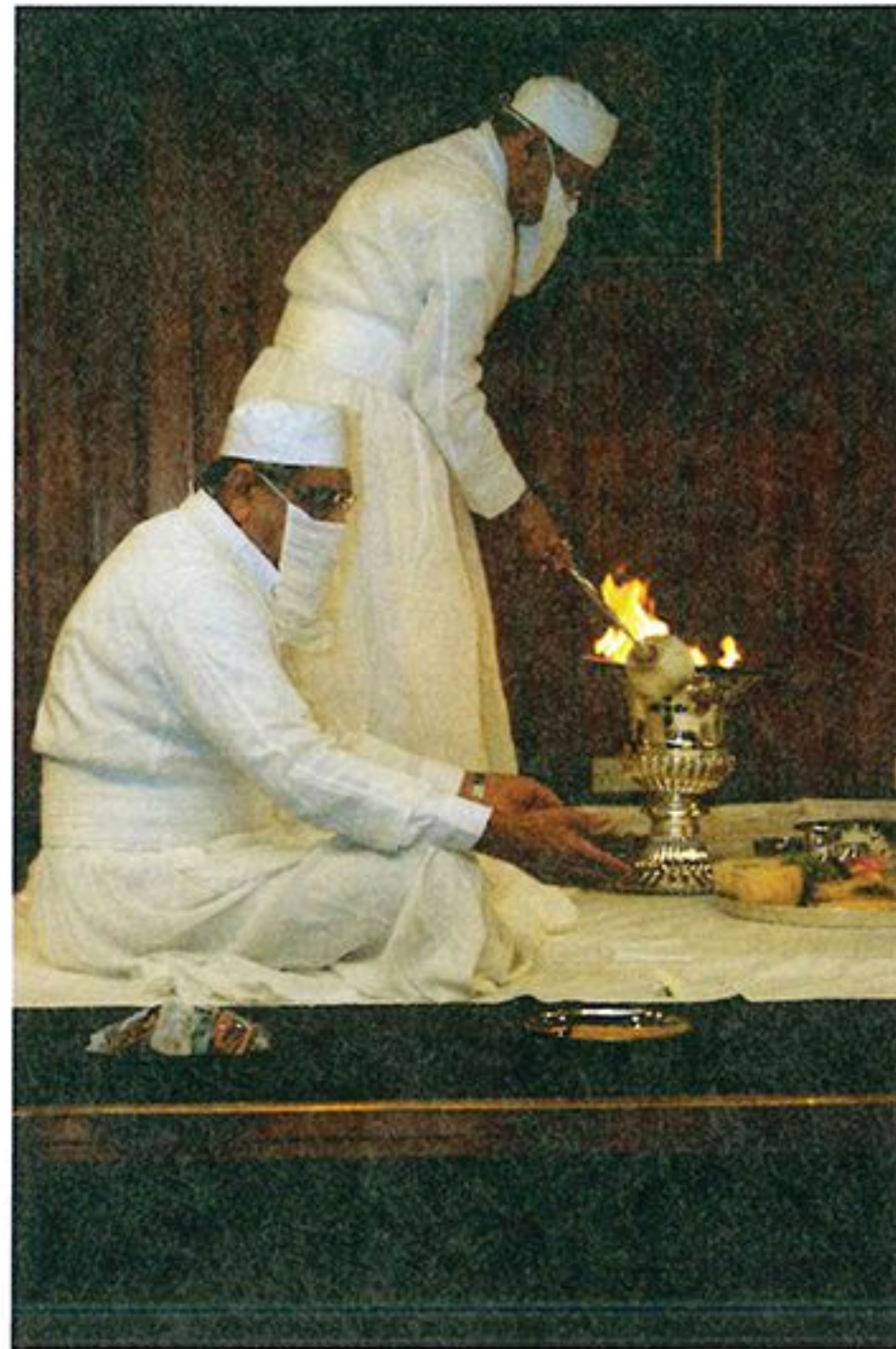
mouths with special cloths to avoid contaminating the fire. Worshippers wash themselves before approaching the fire, and bring offerings of sandalwood and money. In turn they receive ashes, which they rub on their faces.

### Zoroastrianism Today: The Parsis

Once Islam had gained control of Iran in the tenth century, Zoroastrians began leaving. Very few remain in Iran today. Most of the world's Zoroastrians now live in India, where they are known as the Parsis.

The Parsis combine a wide variety of features from the Zoroastrian tradition. Basically they maintain the monotheism of its founder but continue to revere the Avesta as their sacred text.

One well-known feature of the Parsis' religious practice is their manner of disposing of the dead. To avoid polluting the sacred



© Jim Page / Corbis

*Top:* Modern Zoroastrians continue to emphasize the fire ritual, in which they worship the perfect purity of Ahura Mazda.

*Bottom:* Parsis dispose of their dead by leaving them atop a tower of silence such as this one.



© Earl & Nazima Kowall / Corbis



## pantheon

A group of deities recognized by a society, such as the Olympian pantheon of the ancient Greeks.

elements of soil and fire, the Parsis neither bury nor cremate the body of someone who has died; rather, they place the corpse on a tower of silence, which is situated on a hilltop, out of view. Within hours vultures pick the bones clean. After several days, the bones are gathered and thrown into a central well.

The Parsis are a rather closed society. Conversion to Zoroastrianism is generally not allowed, and marriages outside the faith are denounced. The Parsis are highly respected in Indian society because of their economic prosperity and great emphasis on education. They also have a reputation for being philanthropic, devoting a good share of their wealth to societal needs.

## RELIGION IN ANCIENT GREECE

Western culture in general owes an enormous debt to ancient Greece. Democracy, drama, philosophy, and many forms of science and medicine were first developed by the ancient Greeks. In this respect, ancient Greek culture is familiar to us. In the religious sphere too, along with more exotic features, are some familiar aspects. Both Judaism and Christianity developed within a cultural environment that was heavily influenced by Greek ideas. Christian theology, especially, drew a great deal directly from Greek thought.

The greatest cultural advancements were made during the period that began about 700 BC with the epic poet Homer and ended with the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC. The era known as the Hellenistic or classical period, from 479 BC to 323 BC, is especially noteworthy due to its great flowering of artistic and intellectual achievements. Alexander, who conquered a vast territory stretching from Greece and Egypt eastward to India, imported classical Greek culture to the entire region.

## The Religious World of Homer

Sometime around the end of the eighth century BC, Homer, or perhaps two poets or even more (for simplicity's sake we refer to "Homer") composed the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, epic poems concerning the affairs of gods and humans in the Trojan War and its aftermath. For the next thousand years, Homer's influence was so great that he was known simply as the poet. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are commonly regarded as having been the Bible of the Greeks.

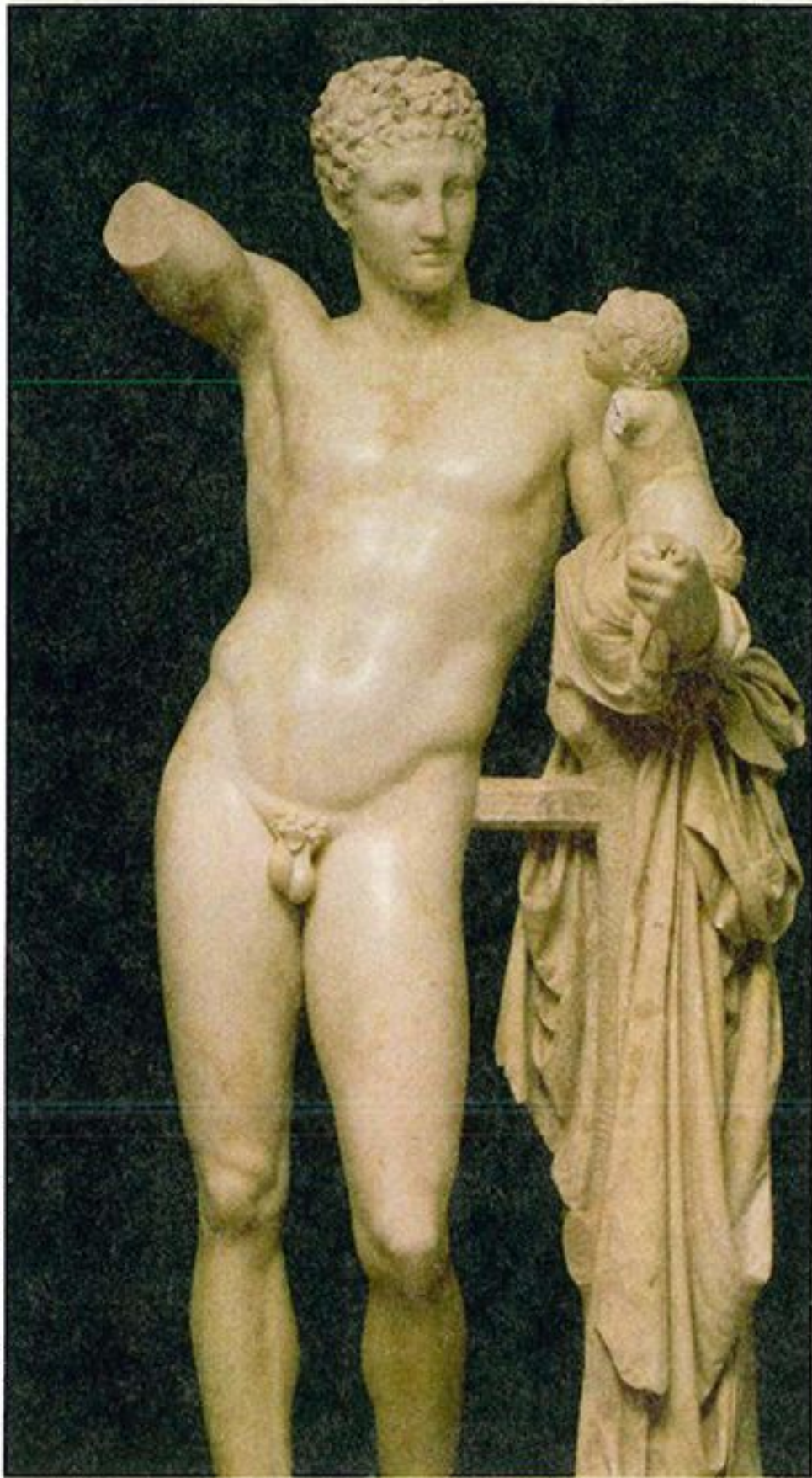
The nature of the religious teachings in the work of Homer differs greatly from that of the teachings in the Jewish and Christian Bibles. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* do, nevertheless, contain an abundance of significant religious teachings.

## The Olympian Pantheon

The most important of Homer's religious contributions is his portrayal of the Greek **pantheon**, or group of gods. The gods and goddesses inhabit the heavenly realm of Olympus (and so are called the Olympian pantheon) and form a loose-knit family. Zeus, the gatherer of clouds and bringer of storms, reigns as the father of the gods. When angered by the wrongful doings of mortals on earth, he is known to strike with thunderbolts. He has a number of consorts, including his sister and wife, Hera (marital relations between family members is common in mythology). Hera is the goddess of marriage and of women. Homer often depicted quarrels between Zeus and Hera, but the Greeks came to look upon their marriage as ideal. Zeus and Hera are the parents of Hephaestus, the god of fire, and of Ares, the god of war.

One basic feature of Homeric religion is already clear: it is polytheistic (*polytheistic* is a Greek word meaning "of many gods"). Other important deities include Poseidon, god of the ocean, and Hades, god of the underworld. Both are brothers of Zeus. Offspring





© Metmuseum / Art Resource, NY



Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale / De Agostini Picture Library / G. Neri Sottile / Bridgeman Images



Artistic depictions of some Greek gods and goddesses (clockwise from top left): Hermes, the messenger god, with the infant Dionysus on his arm; Apollo, the god of the lyre and of the bow, crowned with myrtle; Athena, the goddess of wisdom and defensive warfare, with her warrior's helmet; Hera, the wife of Zeus.



© RMN Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY





This ancient amphitheater at Epidaurus in Greece was the site of dramas that featured the intervention of the gods in human affairs.

### anthropomorphic

Of human form, characteristic of the deities of ancient Greek and later Roman religion.

of Zeus by goddesses other than Hera include Hermes, messenger god; Aphrodite, goddess of love; Apollo, god of the lyre and of the bow (among other things); and Athena, goddess of wisdom.

Along with being polytheistic, Homeric religion is notably **anthropomorphic** (*anthropomorphic* is another Greek word, meaning “of human form”). The gods have human attributes. No deity, not even Zeus, is all-powerful or all-knowing; rather, all the gods and goddesses have their own specific talents, functions, and limitations. Also, their moral behavior is much more humanlike than godlike (as we are accustomed to thinking of godlike behavior, that is). Examples of this abound. Zeus and Hera quarrel frequently. Ares and Aphrodite commit adultery. In general, the Greek gods fail to maintain consistent principles of justice, both toward one another and toward human beings.

How could gods be plagued by such human shortcomings? This problem was addressed by many innovative Greek thinkers of the classical period.



### ACTIVITY

Religions of ancient cultures were primarily polytheistic. Think about the gods and goddesses of the Olympian pantheon, and speculate as to why polytheism appealed to people of ancient cultures.

### Religious Innovations by the Greek Dramatists

Among the people who contributed new ideas to Homeric religion were the dramatists of fifth-century Athens. Aeschylus (about 525 to 456 BC) was especially concerned with the



ideal of divine justice. Rather than focusing on the anthropomorphic characteristics of Zeus, Aeschylus celebrated Zeus's great power and wisdom. His works portray Zeus as ruling with order and justice. For example, the play *Agamemnon* explains human suffering as being a necessary part of the divine plan of Zeus:

Now Zeus is lord; and he  
Who loyally acclaims his victory  
Shall by heart's instinct find the universal  
key:  
Zeus, whose will has marked for man  
The sole way where wisdom lies;  
Ordered one eternal plan:  
*Man must suffer to be wise.*  
(Lines 174–178)

This kind of direct and lofty theology is not found in Homer. The Olympian pantheon, and Zeus especially, takes on a new dignity. Zeus is no longer merely a god of tremendous power; he is now the source and the enforcer of universal moral principles. Sophocles (about 496 to 406 BC), another of the great Athenian dramatists, followed Aeschylus in celebrating the justice of Zeus and also emphasized the god's mercy.

### Piety and Worship

The anthropomorphism of the Homeric deities is reflected in the way they are worshipped. As parents demand respect from their children, the gods and goddesses demand piety and proper worship. The mortals in Homer's poems are diligent in their prayers and words of praise, to which the deities respond favorably. On the other hand, the gods are quick and steadfast in punishing the impious. In the *Odyssey*, for example, the soldiers of Odysseus (also known by his Latin name, Ulysses) are all killed by Zeus for butchering and eating the sun god's cattle. Only Odysseus is spared, for resisting this impious act in spite of his great hunger.

The Greek deities, much like human beings, relish receiving gifts, especially the gift of sacrifice. Cattle, sheep, and other animals are ritually slaughtered, and the meat is cooked and offered to the gods (it is then eaten by the worshippers). Wine is poured out in libations, or acts of sacrifice. Armor and other precious items are placed in temples as gifts. All such forms of sacrificial giving are pleasing to the gods, who in turn are believed to look out for the welfare of the worshippers.

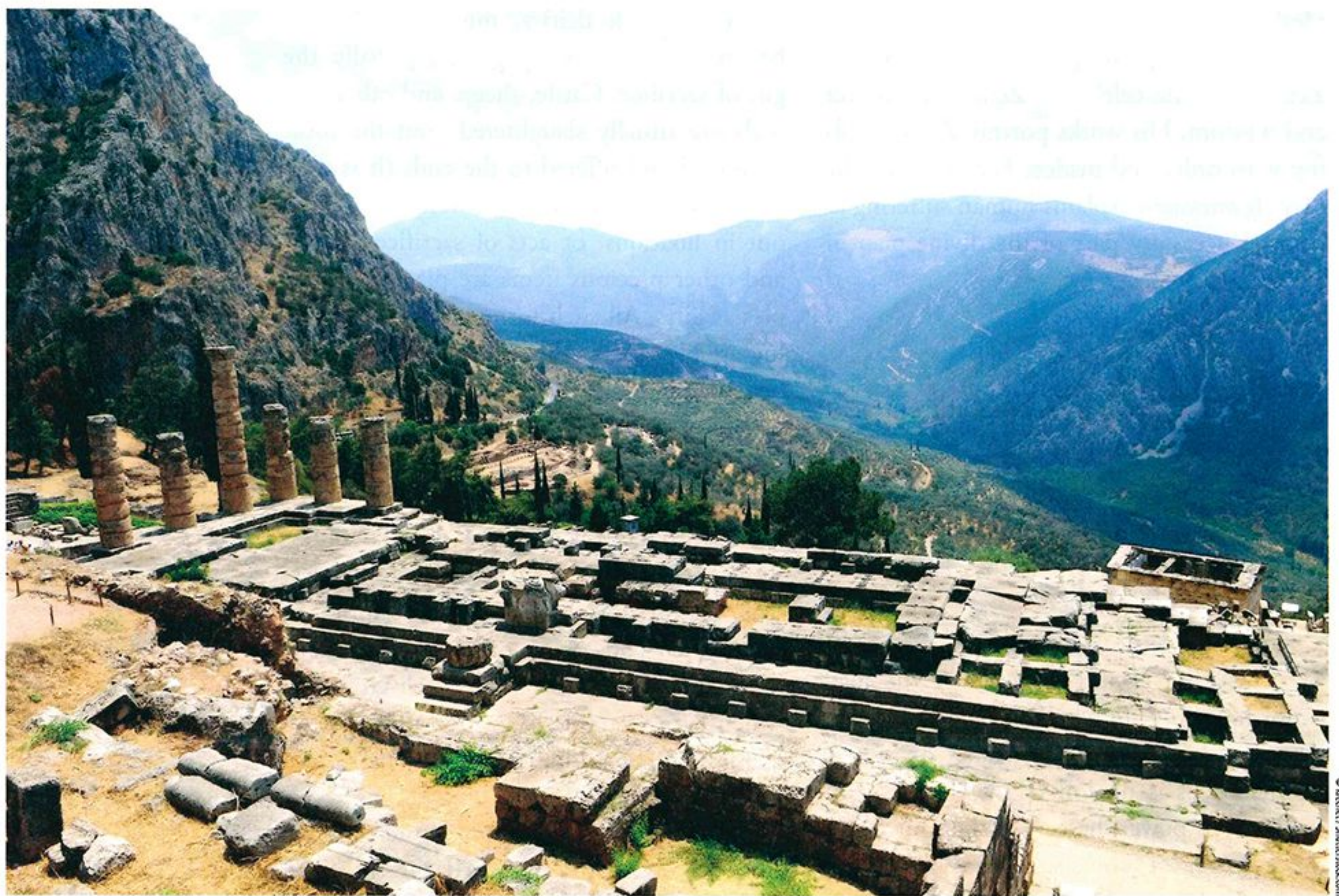
### Festivals

Along with daily worship practices, lavish festivals gave the Greeks, throughout the classical period and beyond, opportunities to honor their gods. Most of those celebrations were local events, specific to each city-state. Athens, for example, worshipped its patron goddess, Athena, in an annual celebration of her birthday.

Other festivals were not limited to specific city-states but involved Greeks from across the land. One such festival developed in Olympia (a small village in southwestern Greece, not to be confused with the heavenly realm of Mount Olympus). Founded in 776 BC, the Olympic Games were held every four years. The games endured for more than one thousand years, until the Roman emperor Theodosius I abolished them in AD 393. They were revived in their modern form in the late nineteenth century.

Like our modern version, the Olympic Games featured athletic contests such as running, wrestling, and boxing, but the festival was primarily religious. Because Theodosius was a Christian, he could not tolerate the games because of the religious focus on honoring Zeus. The games attracted the best athletes from the ancient Mediterranean world. The athletic prowess of the participants was a form of sacrificial gift, offered to Zeus through the performance of the





Ruins of the temple of Apollo, where the oracle of Delphi sat and made her prophecies.

various contests. A victorious performance was deemed an especially worthy gift. The first and final days of the five-day festival were devoted to sacrifices and ceremony. Olympia, situated in a beautiful valley among wooded hillsides, was the main sanctuary of Zeus. Temples of both Zeus and Hera occupied the area adjacent to the stadium and other sites of athletic contests.



### ACTIVITY

Today's emphasis on sports makes athletes into heroes and awards them with fan adoration and large sums of money. Some scholars of religion have even suggested that sports are a religious phenomenon. Discuss the similarities between

sports and religion that might have led to this suggestion.

### Oracles

The Greeks believed the gods communicated their desires and intentions to mortals. In Homer's poems, the gods frequently converse directly with heroes such as Achilles and Odysseus. The gods also reveal their will through dreams and ominous signs, such as the clap of thunder or the flight of birds. And, according to ancient Greek belief through the centuries, the gods communicate through oracles.

An **oracle** was a sanctuary favored by a particular god, who communicated in some manner to those who visited the site. (The word *oracle* refers also to the god's message



itself, or the medium through which it is communicated.) At one oracle, for example, the will of Zeus could be heard through the whispering leaves of its sacred oak grove. The most famous oracle was at Delphi, where the Greeks sought the wisdom of the god Apollo. Situated on the slopes of Mount Parnassus, high above the Gulf of Corinth, Delphi had been considered a sacred site from very early times and was thought to be the center of the earth.

The temple of Apollo stood in an elaborate complex of structures, including a theater, a stadium, and a number of treasury buildings owned by the various city-states throughout Greece. The god communicated through the Pythia, a woman who sat on a tripod within the temple. The Pythia breathed in vapors that arose from the earth and brought on an ecstatic state, and may also have ingested bay leaves or some other intoxicating plant material. In her state of ecstasy, she uttered the will of Apollo in speech that was intelligible only to the oracle's priests. They, in turn, translated her utterances into Greek.

The oracle at Delphi was consulted on issues ranging from private matters to far-reaching public concerns. Major political and military decisions were sometimes based on its revelation of the god's will. Apollo was considered to favor philosophy, and he was credited with pronouncing at Delphi the influential Greek sayings "Know thyself" and "Nothing to excess"; both were engraved on the temple. The oracle also proclaimed the philosopher Socrates to be the wisest of all people.

Like the Olympic Games, the oracle at Delphi endured for centuries. It too was abolished by Emperor Theodosius I, in about AD 390. But by then the voice of Apollo had almost been silenced. The oracle had announced its own decline a short time before.



---

## ACTIVITY

Suppose you were to travel back through time to ancient Greece and visit the oracle at Delphi. What questions would you ask? Given your modern perspective, what concerns would you have regarding the oracle's accuracy?

---

### Homer's Perspective on Death and the Afterlife

Homer also set forth a view of death and the afterlife. When a person dies in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the soul departs from the body, entering the dark and dreary underworld ruled by the god Hades and his queen, Persephone (puhr-se'fo-nee). The realm of Hades, through which flows the River Styx, offers little hope for happiness. The souls, or "shades," lack physical substance and strength, and yet they remember their earthly lives with regret and longing.

In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus journeys to the realm of Hades to consult a famous seer, now dead. While there he encounters the shades of his fallen comrades. His conversation with his friend Achilles, the greatest of all Greek warriors, leaves no doubt as to the gloominess of the afterlife envisioned by Homer:

"But you, Achilles,  
there's not a man in the world more blest  
than you—  
there never has been, never will be one.  
Time was, when you were alive, we  
Argives honored you as a god, and  
now down here,  
I see,  
you lord it over the dead in all your  
power.  
So grieve no more at dying, great  
Achilles."

### oracle

A shrine or sanctuary at which the revelations of a god are received, often through a human medium; also, the medium or the revelation itself.



## mystery religions

A diverse group of beliefs and practices of ancient Greek and Roman civilization that included initiation into a specific community, a personal encounter with the deity, and hope for spiritual renewal and a better afterlife.

I reassured the ghost, but he broke out,  
protesting,  
“No winning words about death to *me*,  
shining Odysseus!  
By god, I’d rather slave on earth for another  
man—some dirt-poor tenant farmer  
who scrapes to keep alive—  
than rule down here over all the breathless  
dead.”

(Book 11, lines 548–559; quoted in  
Fagles, translator, *The Odyssey*,  
page 265)

The Homeric conception of the afterlife left little room for optimism in the face of death. Homer makes brief mention of a paradise, the Elysian fields, but he identifies only one mortal, King Menelaus, who is destined to go there after death. For the Greeks of Homer’s time, the emphasis was clearly on living a good and honorable life, not on the prospects of a happy afterlife.

## Alternatives to Homer: The Mystery Religions

Homer’s influence on Greek religion was great, but he did not tell the entire story. Other forms of religion, some already gaining popularity by Homer’s time, also flourished. Deities such as Demeter and Dionysus, who are barely mentioned in Homer’s poems, rivaled the other gods in popularity. Such deities were worshipped in a diverse group of beliefs and practices that are now referred to as the **mystery religions**.

The word *mystery* is derived from a Greek term meaning “to cover,” and the initiates of these religions did an extraordinary job of keeping their secrets under wraps. As a result, we know very little about the actual rites. It is clear, however, that the mysteries included three basic aspects:

1. Individuals had to choose to become initiates, and they went through some form of initiation ritual.

2. Initiates experienced a personal encounter with the deity.
3. Initiates gained spiritual renewal through participation in the religion and, as with most mystery religions, hope for a better afterlife.

The mystery religions therefore offered important alternatives to the Homeric religion, especially to its dreary prospects for the afterlife in the dark realm of Hades.

The great and long-lived popularity of the mystery religions, together with the joyous pageantry of the days surrounding their initiation rites, bear witness to their power for enhancing the lives of those who followed them. Various mystery religions would play a central role in the religious life of Rome. Indeed, for people of the ancient Roman world, Christianity must have appeared to be something like a mystery religion, involving a community of initiates, a deeply personal relationship with Christ, and hopes for spiritual renewal and a blessed afterlife.

## The Eleusinian Mysteries

The mystery religion par excellence, celebrated at Eleusis, near Athens, honored the grain goddess Demeter and her daughter, Persephone. Along with being very popular for centuries, the Eleusinian mysteries set forth a basic form that influenced the development of later mystery religions in the Roman world.

Mystery religions were typically based on a myth celebrating the theme of new life arising from death. The myth of Demeter and Persephone goes as follows: One day Persephone was gathering flowers in a meadow. Hades sprang from beneath the earth and took her away with him to his dark, subterranean realm. Demeter searched everywhere but could not find her beloved daughter. In her grief and anger, Demeter prevented crops from growing on the land. The famine grew so quickly that humanity was threatened.



Zeus feared that his worshippers would all perish, so he sent Hermes to the underworld to order Hades to let Persephone go. Hades did as he was told, but as Persephone was leaving, he gave her a taste of pomegranate, a fruit symbolic of marriage. Persephone and her mother were joyfully reunited, and the goddess made the crops grow abundantly. But because Persephone had eaten of the pomegranate, Zeus forced her to spend one-third of every year in the underworld as Hades's wife; the rest of the year she could be with her mother.

This myth clearly correlates with the agricultural cycle. For the four months that Persephone is in the underworld, the fields lie dormant. When she returns to earth, new life is born and flourishes for the duration of her eight-month stay. The initiates of the Eleusinian mysteries experienced a similar sort of new life. Through their initiation rites, they enjoyed spiritual renewal, along with the hope of a blessed afterlife, because they had gained the favor of Persephone, queen of the underworld.



## ACTIVITY

The theme of life arising from death, celebrated in classic fashion by the Eleusinian myth of Demeter and Persephone, is universal. It is being expressed all around us, sometimes in myth and other literary and artistic forms, sometimes in nature, and sometimes even within our own personal and social worlds. Think of three ways you have seen this theme expressed. Briefly describe each.

### The Cult of Dionysus

Another popular mystery religion, especially among women, was devoted to Dionysus, a god of fertility, vegetation, and specifically



Source: Paris, France / Peter Will / Bridgeman Images

A depiction of a Dionysian procession created on pottery in the fifth century BC.

the vine (and hence wine). Dionysus is often depicted in Greek art with vines and grapes, and there are accounts of him miraculously turning water into wine.

Worship of Dionysus usually occurred in the remote countryside, among the wild vegetation of the hills and mountains. As in other mystery religions, it aimed at attaining union with the deity. Its goal was primarily accomplished through ritual drinking of wine and eating of animal flesh, in which the god was believed to reside.

Worship of Dionysus was often untamed, ecstatic, and, at its extreme, frenzied. Devotion to Dionysus also played a role in a tamer religious worldview, Orphism.

### Orphism: Freeing the Soul from the Body

**Orphism** is named for the legendary Orpheus, famous in Greek mythology as a gifted musician and singer. According to the Orphics, Dionysus, the son of Zeus, was eaten by the evil Titans. In anger Zeus struck the Titans with his thunderbolts, burning them to death. From their ashes, the first human beings were born.

For the Orphics, this myth established that humans possess a dual nature: the evil, bodily, Titanic aspect, and the good, spiritual, Dionysian aspect. The body, the Orphics believed, is the tomb of the soul (expressed in Greek as *soma sema* [soh'mah say'mah], "body [is] tomb"). The religious task of Orphism was to lead a pure life,

### Orphism

An ancient Greek religion named for the legendary musician and singer Orpheus, which incorporated a myth of Dionysus, emphasized an ascetic lifestyle, and included belief in reincarnation, or the transmigration of the soul.



through vegetarianism and other ascetic practices, so that the soul might eventually escape the body and fully realize its divine, Dionysian nature. This task was thought to take many lifetimes; the Orphics believed in reincarnation of the soul. (We do not know whether these ancient Greeks were influenced by the Hindu doctrine of reincarnation.)

### Orphic Influence on Plato

Orphism remained an important part of Greek religion for centuries. Its influence on the intellectual history of Western civilization is still being felt, for the great philosopher Plato adopted some of its primary beliefs.

Though reincarnation, or the transmigration of souls, has never become a widely popular belief in the West, it was an important part of Plato's philosophy, closely related to his theory of knowledge. Plato believed that we know things in this life partly because we have experienced them in previous lives. Knowledge, therefore, is *recollection*.

Plato also embraced the Orphic notion of the dual makeup of human nature: body

and soul (or mind). According to Plato, truth exists independently of any bodily, or material, evidence, consisting of Forms, or Ideas, which are eternal and perfect. Wisdom lies in identifying oneself with the truth of the Forms, rather than with the changing and imperfect material world. The influence of this **Platonic dualism** can be observed even today. For example, it can be seen in Christianity because important early Christian theologians were well educated in the philosophy of Plato and incorporated his dualism of mind and body into their understanding of Christianity. The great theologian Saint Augustine of Hippo was first attracted to Christianity largely because of its similarities to Platonic philosophy.



---

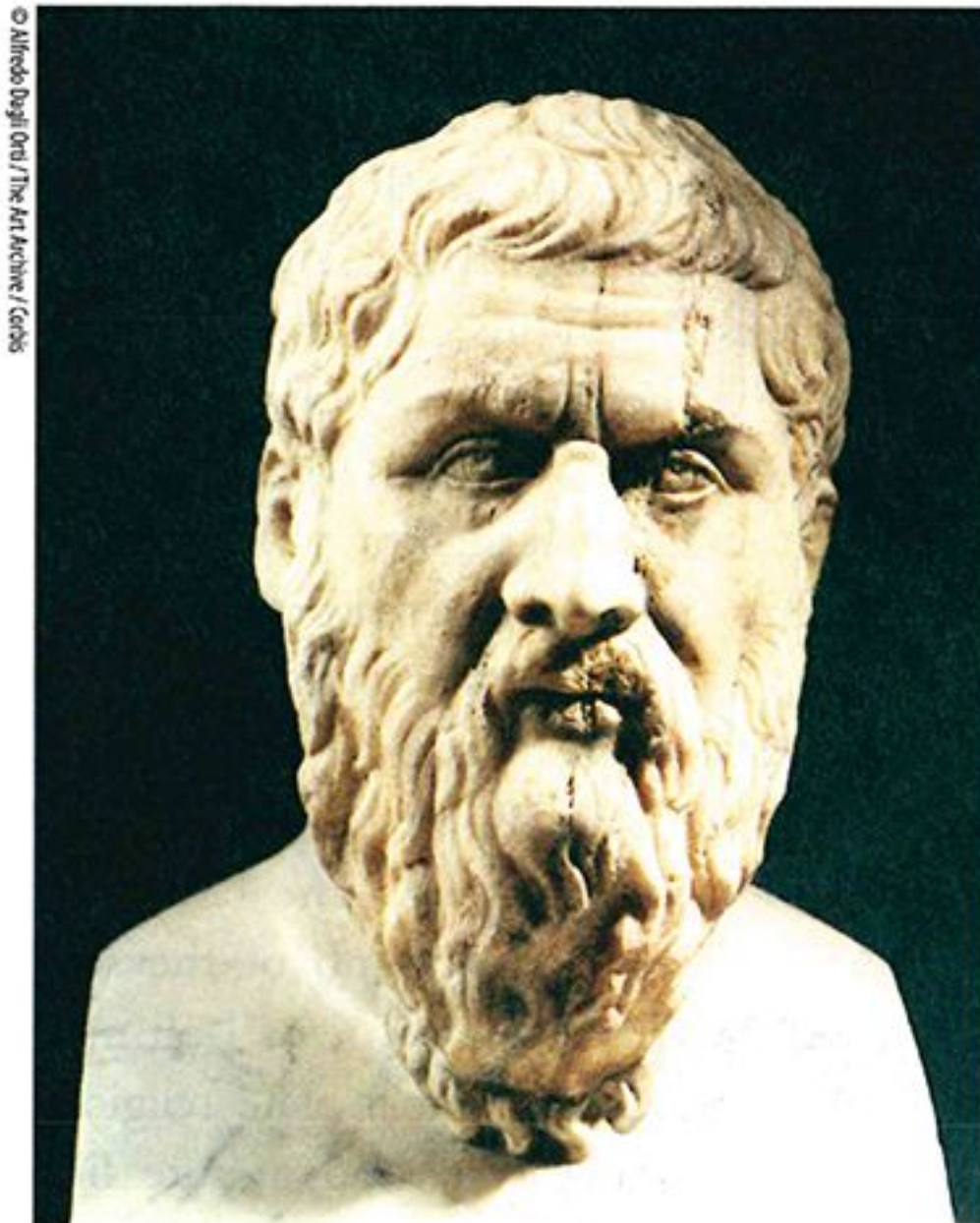
### ACTIVITY

The influence of Plato, especially of his dualism of body and soul (or mind), is deeply ingrained in Christian thought, and in Western culture generally. Reflect on Plato's notion of the body as being distinct from the mind. Do you tend to look at yourself as Plato would have? Do you think this is necessarily the correct perspective? Why or why not?

---

### The Healing Cult of Asclepius

The ancient Greeks commonly turned to religion for healing from sickness or injury. This was the special domain of Asclepius (a-sklee'pee-uhs). Homer described Asclepius as an able, yet mortal, physician, but the Greeks came to regard him as a god. He was thought to be the son of the god Apollo, who also was revered for his healing powers. Hygeia, the daughter of Asclepius, was closely associated with him. Her name means "health," and it is the root of the word *hygiene*.



© Alfredo Dagli Orti / The Art Archive / Corbis

The Greek philosopher Plato (about 428 to 347 BC) embraced the Orphic notion of the body and the soul as two distinct realms of human nature.



The cult of Asclepius was very popular. In fact, for a time Asclepius was one of the most popular of all Greek deities. Unlike the gods of the Olympian pantheon, Asclepius offered the joy of a close relationship between worshipper and god. Like any good doctor, Asclepius cared dearly for every individual who sought his aid.

Asclepius was believed to have tremendous powers of healing, and according to the mythic account of his life, he even had the ability to bring the dead back to life. The great sanctuaries in which he was worshipped were really ancient health spas, where strict diets were enforced, and baths, gyms, and theaters were available for physical and recreational activities. Most of the actual healing occurred while the patient lay in a sacred chamber sleeping, when Asclepius was thought to visit in a dream and administer a cure. Patients commonly left offerings to the god, sometimes in the form of replicas of ailing body parts.

When people of the ancient Mediterranean world first heard about Christianity, Jesus seemed to have much in common with the ancient healer Asclepius. Both were called Savior, and the intimacy of the worshippers' relationship with Asclepius bore a strong resemblance to the relationship with Christ celebrated by Christians.



---

### ACTIVITY

Ancient societies normally viewed the healing of the body as a religious concern. Healings were (and sometimes still are) typically performed by a witch doctor, medicine man or woman, shaman, or other religious figure. Do you think modern Western society treats the healing of the body as a religious concern?

---

## RELIGION IN THE ROMAN WORLD

Our word *religion* is derived from the Latin word *religio*. Our modern term, however, is broader in meaning than the Latin original. In ancient Roman usage, *religio* referred to the ensuring of divine favor through scrupulous observance of ritual. Roman religion was based on the notion that life is enhanced through bonding with the divine powers inhabiting the world. All Romans, no matter their social status, strove to improve their lives through *religio*.

The major features of Roman religion as they were known in later centuries seem to have been in place from at least the time of the founding of the Roman Republic in 509 BC, and they endured to the fourth century AD. Over time Roman religion was influenced by Greek religion. Like the Greeks of Homer's time, the early Romans did not have reason to hope for a blessed afterlife. Their religion was oriented toward achieving things in this world. But the Romans eventually sought more from religion. Such alternatives as the mystery religions became popular throughout the Roman Empire.

### Numina: Supernatural Powers

The Roman gods and goddesses eventually took on many characteristics of their Greek counterparts, but in early times they seem to have differed from those Olympian deities. The Romans tended not to think of their gods in human terms, as Homer had done; rather, they defined their gods vaguely. For example, the Romans were not of one mind regarding the gender of the spirit of mildew, who was alternately called Rogibus (a male name) or Rogiba (a female name).

The deities belonged to a larger category known as **numina** (noo'men-uh). The *numina* were supernatural powers, each in

### Platonic dualism

Plato's highly influential perspective that true reality consists of eternal and perfect Forms, or Ideas, and that the material world, the realm of the body, is an imperfect reflection of the world of Forms, the realm of the soul.

### numina

(noo'men-uh)

Plural of *numen*. The supernatural powers that were the ancient Roman equivalent of deities.

### numen (noo'men)

The ancient Roman concept of supernatural power, possessed in abundance by the gods; also believed to inhabit a wide variety of things and places, as well as human beings.



charge of a specific function. These powers were thought to populate Roman homes, towns, and the countryside, and to inhabit a wide variety of spaces, such as fields, streams, trees, doorways, altars, and shrines. The gods possessed **numen** (noo'men), or supernatural power, in great abundance. By securing the favor of the gods through *religio*, Romans could hope to benefit from this divine power.

### The Roman Pantheon

The most powerful of all Roman deities was Jupiter (also known as Jove), the sky god. Jupiter was one of a triad of deities that also included Juno, the goddess who looked after women, and Minerva, goddess of handicrafts. Vesta, goddess of the hearth, and Janus, god of doorways, were especially venerated within

## SONGS FOR THE GODS

*Aelius Aristides was an accomplished public speaker and writer of Greek literature who lived in the second century AD. He was frequently ill, so he spent many of his days at the Asclepium—the healing sanctuary of the god Asclepius—at Pergamum, a city in Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). His Sacred Tales records the events surrounding his many bouts with illness, especially the constant care he received from Asclepius, the god of healing. According to the Sacred Tales, Asclepius appeared often to Aristides, usually in dreams. In those revelations, the god would prescribe methods of curing whatever ailed Aristides.*

*Along with providing important evidence regarding medical practices in antiquity, the Sacred Tales offers elaborate and personal accounts of religious experience in ancient Greece and Rome. In this passage, Aristides gives something of an introduction to his Sacred Tales, which he wrote as an expression of gratitude to “the God,” Asclepius:*

To narrate what came next is not within the power of man. Still I must try, as I have undertaken to recount some of these things in a cursory way. But if someone wishes to know with the utmost precision what has befallen us from the God, it is time for him to seek out the parchment books and the dreams themselves. For he will find cures of all kinds and some discourses and full scale orations and various visions, and all of the prophecies and oracles about every kind of matter, some in prose, some in verse, and all expressive of my gratitude to the God, greater than one might expect.

(Quoted in Behr, *Aelius Aristides and the Sacred Tales*, page 224)

*Aristides asserts that Asclepius himself approved the project by naming the writings the Sacred Tales, and then goes on to recall what he refers to as “strange events”—his dream visions of Asclepius and miraculous healings of various types. Aristides also credits Asclepius, along with other gods, for having inspired him to produce hymns. The following passage makes clear the polytheistic nature of Aristides’s religion, which was typical of the ancient West:*

Tale follows tale, and let us say again that along with other things, Asclepius, the Savior, also commanded us to spend time on songs and lyric verse, and to relax and maintain a chorus of boys. . . . The children sang my songs; and whenever I happened to choke, if my throat were suddenly constricted, or my stomach became disordered, or whenever I had some other troublesome attack, the doctor Theodotus, being in attendance and remembering my dreams, would order the boys to sing some of my lyric verse. And while they were singing, there arose unnoticed a feeling of comfort, and sometimes everything which pained me went completely away.

And this was a very great gain, and the honor was still greater than this, for my lyric verse also found favor with the God. He ordered me to compose not only for him, but also indicated others, as Pan, Hecate, Achelous, and whatever else it might be. There also came a dream from Athena, which contained a hymn to the Goddess. . . .

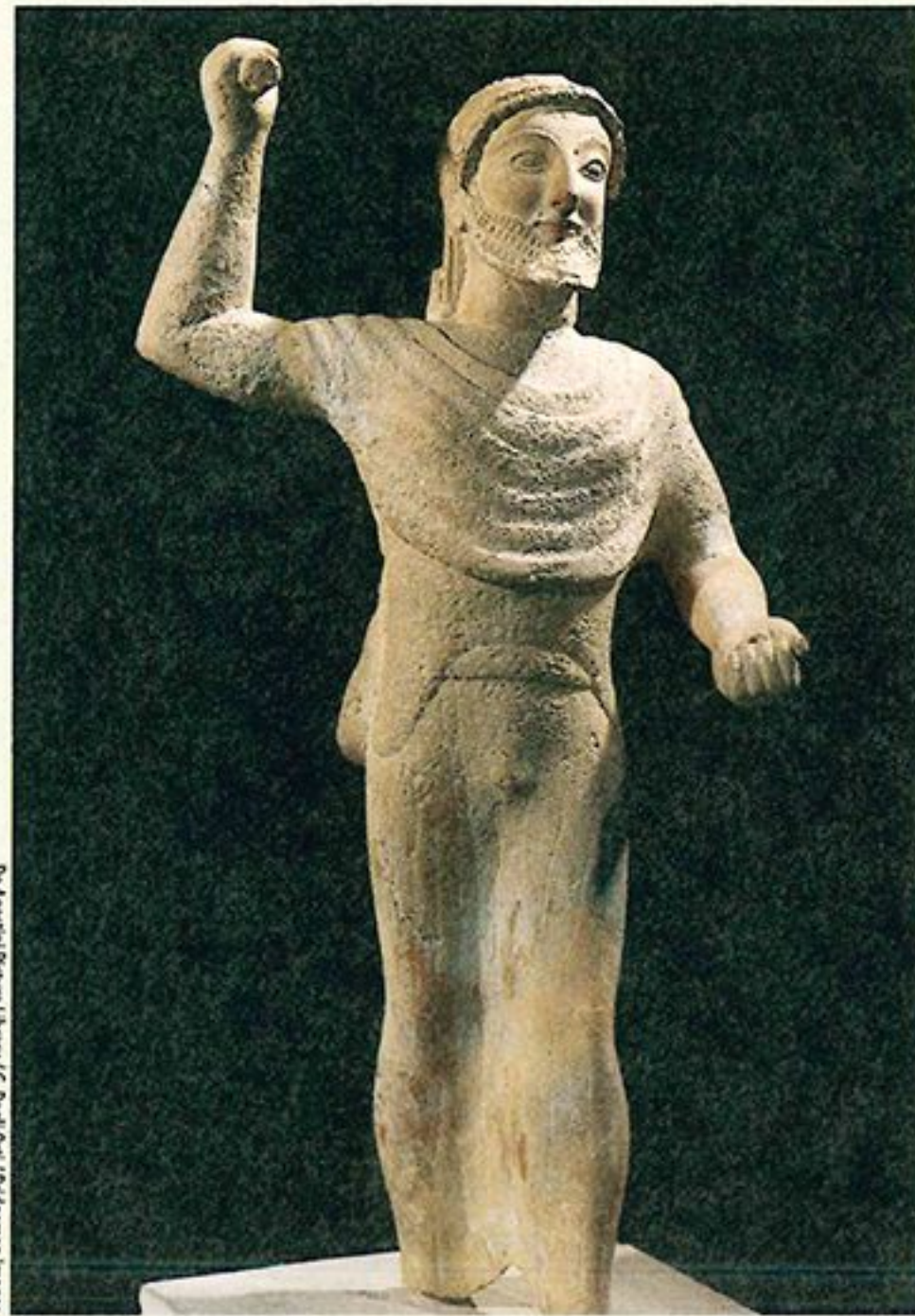
And another dream came from Zeus, but I cannot remember which of these was first or second, and another again from Dionysus, which said to address the God, as “curly haired.”

And Hermes was also seen with his dog skin cap, and he was marvellously beautiful and extraordinarily mobile. And while I was singing of him and feeling pleased that I had easily said the proper things, I awoke. . . .

But most things were written for Apollo and Asclepius through the inspiration of my dreams, and many of these nearly from memory, as whenever I was riding in a carriage, or even was walking.

(Pages 261–262)





This first-century statue of the Roman god Jupiter throwing thunderbolts (*left*) is strikingly similar to one of Zeus crafted six centuries earlier (*right*).

the home. Because he presided over the crossing of the threshold, Janus came to be associated in general with beginnings. That is why the first month of the year is named January.

Once the Romans had come under the influence of Greek culture (especially during Roman conquests of Greek territory in the second century BC), their pantheon quickly took on the characteristics Homer had conveyed about the Olympians. Most of Rome's important deities became identified with Greek counterparts: Jupiter with Zeus, Juno with Hera, Minerva with Athena, Venus with Aphrodite, and so on.

In many ways, the Roman pantheon is more familiar to the modern world than the Greek. For example, the names of six of the eight planets in our solar system are derived from Roman deities. In addition to Jupiter and Venus, there are Mars, god of agriculture and war (identified with the Greek god of war Ares); Neptune, god of the sea (identified

with Poseidon); Mercury, god of traders (identified with Hermes, the messenger god); and Saturn, god of sowing (identified with Cronos, father of Zeus).

Greek influence can also be seen in the adoption into the Roman pantheon of some Greek gods, such as Apollo and Asclepius (called Aesculapius in Latin). Another Greek religious figure the Romans worshipped extensively was Heracles, the great hero known to the Romans as Hercules. He was especially popular among merchants because of his success at making long journeys through perilous lands.

Proper worship of the gods was thought to ensure *pax deorum*, "The peace of the gods." *Pax deorum*, in turn, was believed to help ensure the welfare of the Roman state, which thus maintained official worship practices. The state assigned priests for various religious duties. The priests were highly respected and deeply devoted. They



were kept very busy attending to their tasks, because the gods were worshipped regularly and with utmost precision. By the later centuries of the Roman period, more than one hundred official ceremonies occurred each year, sometimes accompanied by large public festivals, other times carried out in solitude by the assigned priest.

### **A Multicultural World: Mystery Religions of Rome**

By the end of the first century BC, Rome had conquered most of the regions surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. As a result, it imported many cultures, each with its own religious forms. Most Romans freely adopted foreign ideas and practices. Mystery religions became especially popular. Along with the Greek mysteries, important new religions from Egypt, Syria, and Asia Minor gained widespread popularity. By the middle of the first century AD, another new religion, this one from Palestine, had begun to attract followers. For the next three centuries, Christianity would vie with the mystery religions for the religious allegiance of the Roman populace.

The mystery religions had a universal appeal. Though the Eleusinian mysteries were located in a specific place, most mystery religions could be celebrated locally. It was also perfectly common to be an initiate of more than one mystery religion, and most of the religions welcomed members of any social class, ethnic background, or gender. One religion that did not embrace this inclusiveness was Mithraism—the favored cult of the Roman army—which allowed only men. Despite that restriction, Mithraism had an enormous following and was one of the two main rivals of Christianity in the later Roman

Empire. The other rival was the mystery religion celebrating the goddess Isis.

### **Goddess of Many Names: The Cult of Isis**

The cult of Isis drew from an ancient Egyptian tradition about the goddess Isis and her husband, Osiris. According to the myth, Osiris was killed and hacked into pieces by his evil brother. Isis searched far and wide, finally finding Osiris's body parts. She mummified him, which brought him back to life. Osiris became god of the underworld.

The theme of life overcoming death through the power of Isis was central to the goddess's cult. Osiris's powerful position as god of the underworld likewise contributed. A blessed afterlife seems to have been one of the rewards the worshippers of Isis and Osiris anticipated.

Many aspects of the cult of Isis were preserved in a delightful novel from the second century AD called *The Metamorphoses* (also known as *The Golden Ass*), by Apuleius, himself apparently an initiate of the cult. The hero of the story, Lucius, is magically transformed into an ass, only to be changed back into a human through his devotion to Isis. The novel contains a long and detailed description of the ceremony associated with initiation into the religion. Most crucially, its author has Lucius describe the moments within the inner sanctuary of the temple of Isis:

I approached the confines of death. I trod the threshold of [Persephone]; and borne through the elements I returned. At midnight I saw the Sun shining in all his glory. I approached the gods below and the gods above, and I stood beside them, and I worshiped them.

(Quoted in *The Ancient Mysteries*,  
page 158)



Whatever we are to make of Lucius's being "borne through the elements," it is clear that the initiation rite leads to his "rebirth" (as his transformation is described later in the novel) after a ritual death. Life is renewed and enhanced through the symbolic overcoming of death. This theme is common to all the mystery religions of ancient Greece and Rome.

The cult of Isis seems to have influenced Christian veneration of the Virgin Mary. The ancient Romans recognized important similarities between those two women. Artistic representations of Isis holding her son Horus are very similar to those of Mary with the infant Jesus.



### ACTIVITY

The initiates of the mystery religions were forbidden to reveal the secrets of their rites. Apuleius's description of Lucius's moments within the inner sanctuary is therefore especially intriguing to scholars attempting to discover the secrets of the cult of Isis. You have read about the Greek and Roman mysteries, as well as Apuleius's brief—and intentionally sketchy—account of the rites of the inner sanctuary. Now come up with your own description of the rites. Include the elements described by Apuleius, but add details you think Apuleius may have left out. Use your imagination!

### Emperor Worship

The mystery religions influenced the development of Christianity because of the characteristics they had in common with it. Emperor worship influenced Christianity, in part because of the violent persecution



Louvre, Paris, France / Peter Will / Bridgeman Images

The Egyptian goddess Isis suckling the infant Horus.

that sometimes resulted when the Christians refused to participate in it.

Like so many facets of Roman religion, emperor worship had its roots in Greece and other nations in the ancient Mediterranean world. For instance, when Alexander the Great conquered the lands of Egypt and Persia, he was worshipped as a god by their inhabitants.

Among the Romans, leaders such as Julius Caesar flirted with the idea of being



worshipped; some, such as Caligula, Nero, and Domitian, openly declared their divinity. Emperor Augustus (who reigned from 31 BC to AD 14), though, established a pattern that most of the later emperors were to follow. For the most part, he encouraged worship not of himself, but of his genius, or guardian spirit. This actually focused worship on Rome, because the emperor's genius was thought to guard the welfare of the entire state.

This notion of worshipping the Roman state was addressed in a fascinating written correspondence from the early second century AD between the emperor Trajan and Pliny the Younger, who served as a governor under the emperor Trajan. To settle a local dispute, Pliny needed to know who among the populace was Christian. Whoever consented to worshipping the emperor in the proper manner, Pliny wrote, could not have been Christian:

Those who denied they were, or had ever been, Christians, who repeated after me an invocation to the gods, and offered adoration, with wine and frankincense, to your image, which I had ordered to be brought for that purpose, together with those of the gods, and who finally cursed Christ—none of which acts, it is said, those who are really Christians can be forced into performing—these I thought it proper to discharge. . . . They all worshipped your statue and the images of the gods, and cursed Christ.

(Quoted in Kee, *The New Testament in Context*, page 44)

The Christians had obvious reasons for refusing to worship on behalf of the emperor; to do so would have contradicted their belief in only one God. The Romans, on the other hand, grew suspicious of the Christians

because their refusal to worship on behalf of the emperor implied that they did not support the state. Under such circumstances, it was inevitable that conflicts would arise.



---

## ACTIVITY

Roman worship of the genius of the emperor was really a means of expressing one's devotion to the state. In other words, it was a form of patriotism. What forms of "emperor worship" do we practice today? Would you label such forms of devotion "religious"?

---

## LEGACIES FROM ANCIENT TIMES

In this chapter, we have glimpsed many ideas and beliefs that appear strange, and many others that appear familiar. In the religions of Greece and Rome especially, the strangeness is striking. Belief in numerous gods, many of them of questionable moral fiber; a tendency to regard religion primarily as a means of attaining things in this world; and the likelihood that an individual would embrace more than one religion—all these features probably strike the modern Westerner as being rather odd. And yet the similarities between these traditions, born of influences passed from one to another, are equally striking. Such is the normal effect of the historical process: bits and pieces from the past are carried along, sometimes all the way from ancient times to the modern age.

We do not need to limit ourselves to a consideration of Western religions when pondering the extent of influence exercised by the religions of ancient Iran, Greece, and



Rome. For instance, we can look beyond Western religions to find that Zoroastrian doctrines concerning saviors helped to shape the Mahayana Buddhist pantheon of *bodhisattvas*. Nor do we need to limit ourselves to a consideration of influence in order to find meaning in a study of the ancient world.

Indeed, we can find as much meaning in the aspects that remain characteristic only to that world as in the aspects it has passed along to our world, for those strange ways were the innovations of the minds and hearts of human beings, our worthy ancestors.

## CHAPTER REVIEW

1. When and where did Zoroastrianism begin to flourish?
2. How did Zoroastrianism spread beyond its place of origin?
3. Briefly describe the religious experience Zarathustra had at about age thirty.
4. Name the sacred text of Zoroastrianism. What is the oldest material in this text, and who wrote it?
5. Summarize the characteristics and actions associated with Ahura Mazda.
6. What is ethical dualism?
7. What is the Lie, and how does it relate to Ahura Mazda?
8. What must humans choose between in the Zoroastrian cosmic scheme?
9. Summarize Zarathustra's understanding of human destiny.
10. What are the general ethical demands of traditional Zoroastrian life?
11. Who are the Parsis, and where do most of them live today?
12. What are commonly regarded as having been the Bible of the ancient Greeks?
13. Explain the meaning of this sentence: The gods of the Olympian pantheon are anthropomorphic.
14. What was Aeschylus's main contribution to the understanding of the gods of the Olympian pantheon? Give an example.
15. What is an oracle? What is the most famous oracle of ancient Greece, and why was it consulted?
16. Briefly identify the three basic aspects of the mystery religions.
17. What mystery religion honored Demeter and Persephone?
18. What is the god Dionysus associated with, and how is he often depicted in Greek art?
19. Name the goal of the ascetic practices of the Orphics.
20. What is Plato's theory of knowledge?
21. What is Platonic dualism?
22. Why did Jesus seem to have much in common with the ancient Asclepius?
23. What were *numina*, and what sorts of things were they thought to inhabit?
24. Who was the most powerful Roman deity?



25. Identify the six planets of our solar system that are named after Roman deities.
26. Why did the Roman state consider it essential to maintain official worship practices?
27. Which mystery religions were the main rivals of Christianity in the later Roman Empire?
28. Briefly summarize the Egyptian myth of Isis and Osiris.
29. Briefly describe the sort of emperor worship encouraged by Augustus.
30. Why did Christians and Roman rulers clash over emperor worship?