



# *MORTALITY AND IMMORTALITY*

*IN FIRST-CENTURY THOUGHT*

Mount Olympus, which is the highest point in Greece, was considered by the ancients to be home of the twelve Olympian gods.

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By Michael W. Olewski

**A**S CHRISTIANS, we know what the Bible teaches about how we are to live and the hope we have of the resurrection and eternal life. Have you ever wondered, though, about the beliefs of the people Paul encountered on his missionary journeys?

The religious climate of the first century was right for the spread of the message of Christ. Throughout the Roman Empire, the people had a spiritual hunger and sought for true meaning in life. For many, the traditional religions of Greece and Rome had lost their meaning. They had become formal, unemotional expressions that did not meet their needs.

Into this milieu Christianity was born. In his Letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul instructed his readers about living in Christ, and in Romans 6:8-18 the promise of eternal life is implied. This promise is precisely stated at the end of the chapter (Rom. 6:22-23). We will briefly consider the beliefs concerning mortality and immortality of the principal religious systems that competed with Christianity during this period.

### Non-Jewish Religions of the Greco-Roman World

During the first century, the polytheistic religions of the empire were in a state of constant change. The people were attracted to the religious philosophies that sought to redefine the traditional religions and to local religious expressions that combined aspects of the new religions with the old.<sup>1</sup>

*Classical Greek Religion*—This was the mythology comprised of the gods of Mount Olympus. In time, the Romans adopted the Greek pantheon of gods and gave them Roman names; but the religion remained essentially the same. Those who followed the mythology and wanted to receive the favor of the gods had to determine to which god they would pray and what prescribed rituals they would follow.

By the Christian Era, people were losing confidence in the old mythology.<sup>2</sup> Unlike Christianity, the mythology of Greece and Rome held no belief in a resurrection. Some adherents of the old mythology believed that all existence ceased at death, but most held to the belief of “a continuing, shadowy, existence in Hades.”<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, classical Greek religion was never particularly concerned with ethical issues. It offered little help to those struggling with difficulties and despair—and virtually no hope beyond death. Thus the classic religion became less relevant, and the people looked elsewhere for the answers to life’s questions.<sup>4</sup>



In Rome, interior of the Pantheon, a temple dedicated to all of the Roman gods.

ILLUSTRATION PHOTO: BOB SCHWARTZ (1/12/2017)

*Philosophies*—A number of philosophies had developed in the centuries before Christ. “Although today we think of philosophy as distinct from religion, it was not so in antiquity. All of the major philosophers articulated worldviews about correct behavior as well as belief.”<sup>5</sup>

During the first century, the beliefs varied. Some paralleled the classical Greek beliefs and even expanded the traditional view of Hades to include a place of punishment known as Tartarus (similar to the biblical hell) and for some special individuals a place of joy known as Elysium (similar to our heaven).<sup>6</sup>

Some of the philosophies were radically different, however, from these versions of the classical Greek belief system. For example, Epicurean philosophy denied the existence of an afterlife; Stoic philosophy, however, was pantheistic and viewed death as unification with a cosmic oneness. The Neo-Pythagoreans believed in reincarnation. None of the philosophies held a belief in resurrection.

*Mystery Religions*—“With mythology on the wane and the philosophies largely reserved for the elite few, a major part of first-century Hellenistic life that increasingly filled the religious void for numbers of people involved the so-called mystery religions.”<sup>7</sup> These cults conducted elaborate initiations and had secret rites known only to those initiated into the groups. Due to their secrecy, our knowledge of these mystery religions is limited. Historians, though, have been able to piece together some of their beliefs.

The mystery religions were interested only in the emotional life of the initiate—not with adherents holding what the mysteries considered to be correct doctrine or beliefs. Christianity is exclusive in that it upholds only one way to salvation and that being through Jesus

## MYSTERY RELIGIONS



**Marble relief of Demeter, goddess of corn and earth. "Demeter" translates "mother earth." Relief dates from the late classical period: 4th cent. B.C. Greeks believed Demeter was the sister of Zeus.**



**Marble statue of Cybele, the Greeks' mother goddess. She sits on a throne and would have held a scepter in her raised hand; a lion stands at her right. Dated to 400–350 B.C. from Athens, Greece.**



**Bronze statuette of Osiris; with gold inlay; dates 8th–1st centuries B.C. Egyptians believed that dead pharaohs became embodiments of Osiris and that Osiris judged non-royal Egyptians at death.**



**Dated to about A.D. 220, a sarcophagus relief depicts a scene from the myth of Adonis. During a boar hunt, Adonis has fallen, likely wounded. Adonis was the Greek god of death and rebirth.**



**Head that was once part of a statue of Isis; from a temple honoring her and Serapis; found in Thessalonica and dated A.D. 138. Greek worship of the Egyptian goddess Isis goes back to the 3rd cent. B.C.**

Christ. In contrast, the mysteries were inclusive; they did not limit initiates to just one cult; adherents were free to follow any or all of the cults.

While the mystery religions promised immortality and an eternal life in union with the individual cults' gods, this immortality was lacking when compared to the spiritual idea of eternal life that the New Testament pictured. Obtaining eternal life in a mystery religion was the result of performing the correct rituals; the person's behavior, though, could remain unchanged. Even though these mystery religions promised an eternal life, (like the various philosophies) none of them believed in a resurrection.<sup>8</sup>

### Judaism

Within Judaism of the first century, the Pharisees and the Sadducees were the most influential religious factions.<sup>9</sup> The New Testament prominently mentions both of these groups. While Judaism promoted a moral lifestyle that appealed to many non-Jews, neither of these Jewish factions attracted many converts.

**Pharisees**—The Pharisees, whom many consider to be the spiritual founders of modern Judaism, comprised the largest and most influential of the parties. The New Testament pictures them as Jesus' opponents. Some, though, were not opposed to the Lord as evidenced by Nicodemus, who was "a ruler of the Jews" (John 3:1),<sup>10</sup> a Pharisee, and a member of the

Sanhedrin. Even the apostle Paul, the one-time enemy of Christ, speaking in his own defense before the Sanhedrin, identified himself as "a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees" (Acts 23:6).

The Pharisees controlled the synagogues and had a strong influence over the common people. This faction moved Judaism away from reliance on sacrifice to being law centered. This shift occurred because of the Babylonian captivity when the Jews had been unable to sacrifice in the Jerusalem temple.

Pharisees believed the Old Testament (the Law, Prophets, and Wisdom) to be authoritative. They were strong proponents of both the written and oral law; plus, they believed strict obedience to the law was the only way to God. The Pharisees believed in the existence of angels and demons, and they looked forward to both life after death and a bodily resurrection.

**Sadducees**—The Jerusalem temple and its operation were under the control of the Sadducees. Even though their membership came from the more affluent of society and the high priestly families, the Sadducees stood in opposition to the Pharisees. Both the Pharisees and the Sadducees, though, shared control of the Sanhedrin.

The Sadducees were opposed to the oral law and accepted only the first five books of the Old Testament as authoritative. They did not believe in the existence of angels or demons, denied the possibility of life after death, and rejected the belief in a resurrection

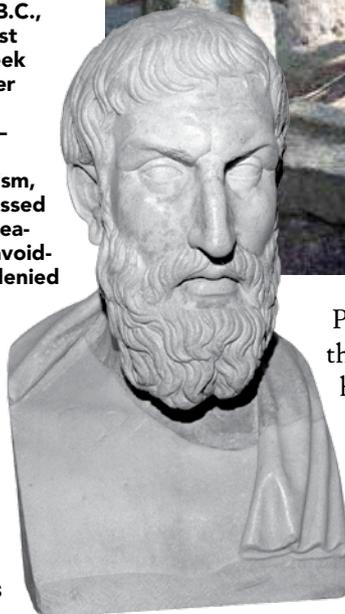
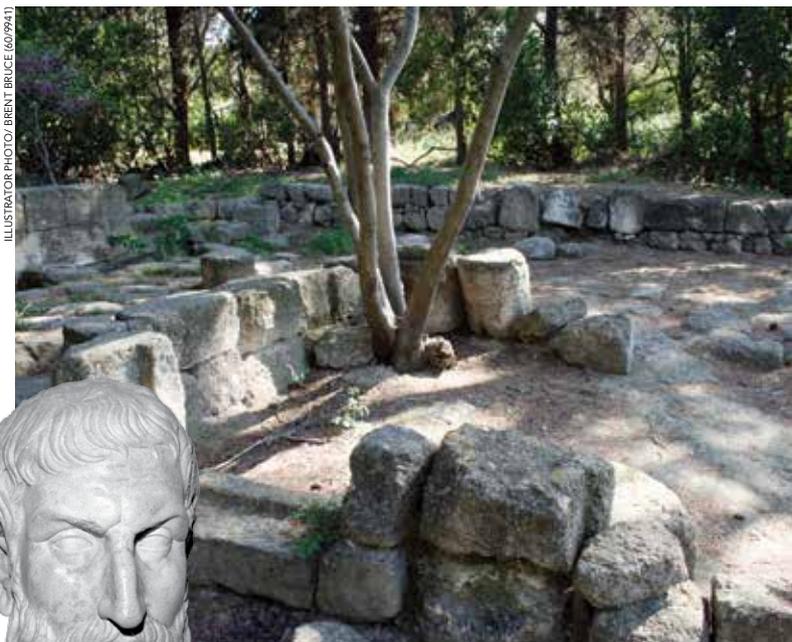


**Bust of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine; 2nd cent. B.C.** Cultic practices included excessive drinking and frenzied revelry. Members believed these behaviors raised them to new levels of spiritual expression.

**Marble statue of Mithras; Roman; dated 2nd cent. A.D.** Mithraism began in Persia. For Greeks and Romans, it was an astral religion. Mithras slaying the bull showed the end of Taurus and beginning of spring.

**Right: Ruins of the synagogue at Beth She'arim in Israel. Many members of the Sanhedrin relocated here as the Romans were attacking Jerusalem and destroying its temple in A.D. 70.**

**Lower right: Found near Rome and dating to the 3rd cent. B.C., marble bust of the Greek philosopher Epicurus (lived 341–270 B.C.). Epicureanism, which stressed seeking pleasure and avoiding pain, denied the existence of an after-life.**



Paul wrote to early believers, though, and explained confidently how they had assurance of everlasting life because of Christ. He explained to those at Corinth:

Death, where is your victory?  
Death, where is your sting?  
Now the sting of death is sin,  
and the power of sin is the law.

But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ!

—1 Cor. 15:55-57

(see Matt. 22:23). This sect did not believe God concerned Himself with people's lives. They believed people were totally free to live as they chose, but they believed in adherence to the Law. The Sadducees ceased to exist after the destruction of Herod's temple (A.D. 70), but the Pharisees and synagogue worship continued.

The vast majority of Jews did not belong to any of these factions, which likely comprised less than five percent of the population. Most people just followed the traditions of their parents. They believed in God and lived simple lives. These were the average people the New Testament pictured and were the first converts to Christianity.<sup>11</sup> These people generally shared the Pharisees' view of the resurrection. This belief is evidenced in Martha's words to Jesus after Lazarus's death. She stated she knew Lazarus would "rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (John 11:24).

### An Ultimate Hope

Christianity was born into a world with many competing religious beliefs. Most were polytheistic and less concerned with moral living than with proper ritual. Even though most believed in an afterlife, it was one with little promise. These Greco-Roman religions held no hope of a resurrection. Sadly, not all Jews even believed in eternal life and those that did had their hope in the Law.

1. Norman Perrin and Dennis C. Duling, *The New Testament: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 8.
2. George H. Guthrie, "The Religious Background of the New Testament," *Read the Bible for Life, Leader Kit* (Nashville: LifeWay, 2011), 1.
3. N. T. Wright, "The Resurrection of Resurrection," *Bible Review* (August, 2000).
4. Samuel Angus, *The Mystery Religions* (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), 11-13.
5. Guthrie, "The Religious Background of the New Testament," 2.
6. Andrew Faulkner, "Death and the Afterlife in Homer," *Labyrinth: An online journal published by the Classical Studies Department of the University of Waterloo 90* (October 2009). Accessed 11 January 2013. Available from the Internet: [www.classics.uwaterloo.ca/labyrinth/labyrinthArchive/2010.html](http://www.classics.uwaterloo.ca/labyrinth/labyrinthArchive/2010.html).
7. Guthrie, "The Religious Background of the New Testament," 4.
8. Angus, *The Mystery Religions*, 142.
9. Much of the information concerning the religious groups in first-century Judaism came from "Jewish Parties in the New Testament" by Clayton Harrop in *Holman Bible Dictionary*, gen. ed. Trent C. Butler (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 1991), 791-94.
10. All Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).
11. Shave I.D. Cohen, "Pharisees, Sadducees, Revolutionaries, and Plain Jews," in *Judaism's First Century Diversity*, *Frontline* [online; accessed 30 January 2013]. Available from the Internet: [pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/portrait/judaism.html](http://pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/religion/portrait/judaism.html).

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