



# Judgment

## IN GRECO-ROMAN THOUGHT

But you, why do you criticize your brother? Or you, why do you look down on your brother? For we will all stand before the tribunal of God. . . . So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.

—Romans 14:10,12, HCSB

By Steve W. Lemke

**W**HAT DID THE CONCEPT of judgment mean in Greco-Roman religion? Unlike Christianity, in which the concept of divine final judgment is a key tenet, judgment did not play a primary role in pagan Greek and

Roman theology. Nevertheless, both in their daily lives and in their mythology, the Greeks and Romans understood and practiced the concept of judgment. In fact, over the years, Greco-Roman thought moved from almost no concept of final judgment toward a stronger affirmation of a final divine judgment.

### The Wrath of Their Gods

In earlier Greco-Roman religion, judgment tended to be exercised more in this world than in the world to come. The early Greeks viewed judgment as taking place in this life, affecting not only the individuals concerned but their children and grandchildren. Morality was not about good and evil but



ISTOCK PHOTO

was based on social responsibility and duty. Greco-Roman religious thought had no objective and absolute moral standard. For the pagan, serious attention to family and community responsibilities demonstrated moral and ethical integrity.<sup>1</sup>

In an earlier time, humans would render judgment about the eternal

**Left: Artist's depiction of the fabled underworld Charon's ferry crossing the River Styx with the souls of the dead.**

**Right: Greek mythology taught that Hades ruled the underworld.**

**The priest Hadaios dedicated this votive relief to the god Hades who is depicted climbing into a chariot. The relief was uncovered west of Corinth, in the Derveni region; dated to the 2nd cent. A.D.**

destiny of another person's soul at the end of the deceased person's life. However, the outward appearances and wealth of the individuals tended to deceive these human judges, so Zeus appointed gods as judges, for they looked upon the soul alone and were not deceived by outward appearances. The gods in the Greek pantheon, however, were subject to human-like passions and emotions. Hence, their judgments at times appeared to be arbitrary and vindictive. Based on their own whims, these gods sometimes inflicted harsh punishments on individuals and their children in this life.

Driven by their own desires and lusts, the gods or goddesses exercised vengeance against humans who displeased them. A Greek felt that one's fate was at the mercy of rather merciless gods. Therefore, many early pagan rituals focused on appeasing all the gods in order to stave off their wrath.<sup>2</sup> For example, the altar to an unknown god that Paul mentioned in his sermon on Mars Hill (Acts 17:23) was evidently built to appease even a god of whom the Greeks were unaware.

To avert displeasing the gods, observing proper procedures was essential. For example, people believed gods heard their prayers only when they offered them flawlessly with the correct phrasing. Even the slightest error in a ceremony required it to be restarted from the beginning, no matter how far into the ceremony the error occurred.<sup>3</sup>

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/G.B. HOWELL/ THESSALONIKI ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM (35/25/21)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/G.B. HOWELL/CINCINNATI MUSEUM (35/317/8)

**Coins Left: (top) Metapontum, stater, ca. 500 B.C. Obverse depicts an ear of grain; (bottom) Gela, didrachm; ca. 495-480 B.C. Obverse depicts Gelas, the river god, as a man-headed bull. Coins of this type were put on the eyes of the deceased.**

The Greeks and Romans lived in constant fear of suffering the gods' wrath.

### Judgment in the Afterlife

In earlier Greek thought, as Homer described in *The Odyssey*, "Hades" was the term for the afterlife (named after the god Hades who was overseer of the underworld). This was a shadowy place where all the dead went as the common fate of mankind.<sup>4</sup>

The Orphic mystery religions were the first to speak of a divine judgment in the afterlife. Existence in the afterlife was not divided between a place of reward or punishment but was a place where the soul migrated through a series of existences similar to what people experienced on earth.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO: BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/26/15)

**Above: One of four sides of an ivory box with scenes of Christ's Passion. This scene depicts Pilate as he washes his hands. From Rome; dated A.D. 420-430.**

"Their judgment in the underworld [was] not a final retribution. It [was] the apportionment of a transitional stage between one earthly existence and the next."<sup>5</sup>

When the apostle Paul's sermon addressed the Stoic and Epicurean Greek philosophers on Mars Hill in Athens (Acts 17:18-21), his listeners' responses reflected the diversity of Greek perspectives on judgment. Paul referred to Jesus coming to judge the world (vv. 30-31). The Stoics and Epicureans differed in their responses to the concept of a final judgment (v. 32). The Epicureans rejected belief in an afterlife, so the idea of divine judgment was alien to their beliefs. The Stoics believed a person's divine spark, which was an internal element that linked them to gods and nature, survived after death. Concepts of a resurrection and judgment were foreign to Stoics.<sup>6</sup>

The mythology in many forms of Greek religion, however, had a clear concept of a judgment day that determined one's eternal destiny. Although

the details varied from one account to the other, all of the accounts shared common denominators. In contrast to the arbitrary punishments the mythological gods supposedly gave in this life, Zeus—as chief of the gods—enforced genuine justice in the afterlife. He shared his throne with his daughter Dike (the goddess representing "right").<sup>7</sup> Zeus appointed Rhadamanthys to judge persons from Asia, and Aeacus to judge persons from Europe. He appointed Minos as a judge for appeals; Minos supposedly held a golden scepter that underscored his authority. Rhadamanthys, Aeacus, and Minos judged in a meadow, with one path leading to Tartarus (a place of torment and suffering located below Hades) and the other to the Isles of the Blessed.<sup>8</sup>

Plato brought these myths into Greek philosophical thought in his dialogues of Socrates. Socrates expressed his belief in a judgment that determined one's eternal destiny.<sup>9</sup> Those who lived a righteous life went to live a blessed life in the Isles of the Blessed, but those who lived an unrighteous life were punished in Tartarus.<sup>10</sup> Socrates described the underworld as having five rivers—

Oceanus, Acheron, Pyriphlegethon, Cocytus, and Styx, which flow through marshland to the Acherusian Lake, which plunges into Tartarus.<sup>11</sup>

According to Socrates, the judgment of souls determined where they were to go in the afterlife. The boatman Charon ferried souls across the River Styx. He would do so, though, only if paid with a Greek *obolos* coin; hence, the Greek custom was to put coins on the eyes of the dead.<sup>12</sup> The righteous and the wise went upward to a place of reward. Those judged morally neutral were put in Acheron to journey toward the Acherusian Lake, where they would undergo purification. Those who committed serious crimes but were later penitent were cast into Tartarus for a period of punishment, and later released. The murderers went to Cocytus, while those who committed violence against their parents were put on Pyriphlegethon, and both of these eventually arrived on the Acherusian Lake for further purification (although they had to be pardoned by the person they offended or they would be cast back into Tartarus). Those whose souls were evil were cast into Tartarus without any opportunity for escape.<sup>13</sup>

### Contrasting Views of Judgment

How do Greco-Roman perspectives on sin and judgment compare with those of Christianity? Similar to Greek thought, the Bible presents *hubris* as the root sin of humans trying to usurp prerogatives that belong properly only to God. Adam and Eve ate from the tree of good and evil so they would "be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5b, HCSB). The Bible consistently teaches that pride is an abomination in God's sight, a root sin that leads inevitably to a fall (see Prov. 16:5,18; 1 John 2:16). True Christian piety is to love God, not to perform rituals (Matt. 22:36-38).

The one true God against whom

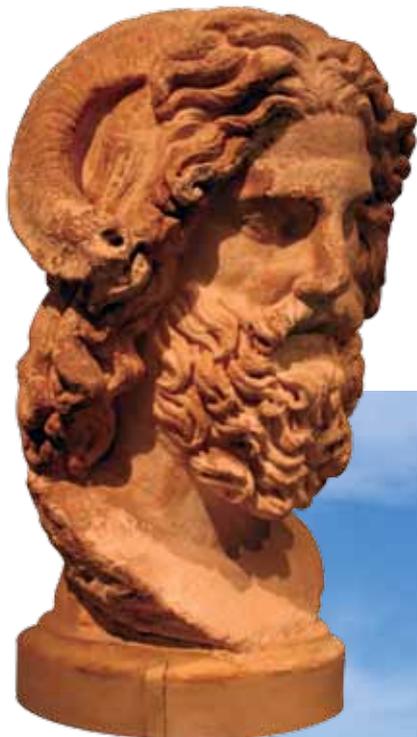
persons sinned, however, could hardly be more different than the mythological gods of Greek thought. The Greek gods had character flaws such as arrogance, selfishness, and lust. The pagan worshipers had every right to fear their wrath.<sup>14</sup> The God of the Bible, however, is holy and righteous in His very being (Lev. 11:44-45; Matt. 5:48). Unlike the Greek gods, whose reactions often were fickle and unpredictable, the

genuine God is perfectly consistent in His being (Ps. 90:1-2; Mal. 3:6). Romans 14:11 echoes the earlier statement in Isaiah 45:23 that every knee will bow before God's judgment.<sup>15</sup> Not only is He a perfectly just Judge, He is also a loving God who loves all peoples (Mic. 7:18; 1 John 4:7-8). Instead of requiring appeasement sacrifices for Him, He has provided the atoning sacrifice for sin through Jesus Christ His Son (John 3:16-17; 1 John 4:10). Among the Greeks' and Romans' pagan religions, we find no hint of their gods ever acting as a sacrificial substitute for a person or persons.<sup>16</sup>

Regarding the final judgment, the New Testament agrees with later Greek thought that fallible humans are not suited to be objective judges of others (Matt 7:1-2; Luke 6:37; 12:57; Rom. 2:1; 14:1-10). However, the New

Testament admonition, "Do not judge, so that you won't be judged" (Matt. 7:1, HCSB) cut against the grain of the Greek educational system, which encouraged critically judging others in many areas of life. In fact, outside of early Christianity no exact corollary to this teaching against judging others exists.<sup>17</sup>

The focus of Romans 14:1-10 is the inappropriateness of humans judging other humans, for judgment appropriately belongs to God alone.<sup>18</sup> Although it is not as obvious in English, various forms of the same Greek root word *krino* translated as "judge," "judgment," "regard," or "condemn" appear nine times in Romans 14 (vv. 1,3,4,5a,5b,10a,13,22,23). From *krino* we get the English words "critic," "criticize," "critique," "critical," and "criterion."



**Above: Marble bust depicting Zeus Ammon. Ammon was the most powerful of the Egyptian gods. Romans and Greeks identified Ammon with Zeus, who was the father and most powerful of the Olympian gods. Zeus was commonly depicted as bearded; Ammon, with ram's horns. In time, the features were combined into the one deity, Zeus Ammon. Dated about A.D. 120-160.**

**Remains of the Temple of Zeus in Athens, Greece. Located southeast of the Acropolis, the temple, which measured about**

**135 by 315 feet, originally had 104 columns, each 55 feet tall. Today only 15 remain**

**standing. Greek mythology taught that Zeus appointed gods as judges.**



ISTOCK PHOTO

ILLUSTRATOR: PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE/ METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART/ NEW YORK (607609)



Above: Wooden board inscribed with lines 468-473 of Homer's *Iliad*, Book I. Roman

period (37 B.C.–A.D. 324); found in Egypt. Homer wrote *The Iliad* in about 800 B.C.

Romans 14:10 utilizes another Greek word, *bema*, meaning “judgment seat” or “tribunal.”<sup>19</sup> The judgment seat was the place the properly authorized judge would render judgment. Pilate was on the judgment seat as he tried Jesus (Matt. 27:19; John 19:13). Herod was on a *bema* when he was struck down by an angel and died (Acts 12:21). Gallio (18:12,16-17) and Festus (25:6,10,17) were on their respective judgment seats when Paul stood on trial before each of them. Although most usage of “judgment seat” regarded judging in this present world, some Greek literature such as the Sibylline prophecy predicted that “‘all the souls of men’ will be led ‘to the tribunal of the great, immortal god.’”<sup>20</sup>

While Romans 14:10 refers to the “judgment seat of God,” 2 Corinthians 5:10 refers to the “judgment seat of Christ.” Although different in terminology, this clearly represents no conflict, for Jesus is the One whom God has appointed to judge humanity (John 5:30; Acts 10:42; 17:31; 2 Tim. 4:1,8).

While the “Great White Throne Judgment” (Rev. 20:11-15) concerns the judgment of unbelievers, the “judgment seat of Christ” concerns degrees of rewards for God’s people (Rom. 14:10; 1 Cor. 3:10-15; 2 Cor. 5:10).<sup>21</sup>

The New Testament sometimes utilized the same word *hades* that the Greeks used to refer to the shadowy place of the dead in the afterlife. In some cases, the New Testament uses *hades* (translated as “hell” in the King James Version) as a synonym for death, roughly equivalent to the Old Testament concept of Sheol (Acts 2:27,31). Compared to Greek thought, the New Testament has a much more clearly divided eschatology, with *hades* associated with hell or Gehenna, the place where the wicked are punished, in contrast with paradise or heaven, where the redeemed are rewarded (Matt. 11:23; 16:18; Luke 16:23; Rev. 1:18; 6:8; 20:13-14).<sup>22</sup>

Judgment in Greek religion spoke of arbitrary and vindictive penalties that imperfect gods assessed and that worshipers averted by offering appeasements of ritual and sacrifice. Judgment in Christianity is a fair and just evaluation made by our holy and loving Father, who offers salvation through the atoning sacrifice of His Son, Jesus

Christ. The future offered through Christianity is brighter indeed! **B**

1. Jo-Anne Shelton, *As the Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 372-73.
2. Robert Parker, “Greek Religion” in *The Oxford History of Greece and the Hellenistic World*, ed. John Boardman, Jasper Griffin, and Oswyn Murray (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 306, 312-13.
3. Shelton, 373, 380.
4. “Hades” in Michael Grant and John Hazel, *Who’s Who in Classical Mythology* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1973), 193-94; “Hades” in Sabine G. Oswalt, *Concise Encyclopedia of Greek and Roman Mythology* (Chicago: Follett, 1969), 120-22.
5. Friedrich Buchsel, “κρίνω” [*krino*, judgment] in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* [TDNT], ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 933-34; see also David S. Noss and John B. Noss, *A History of the World’s Religions*, 9th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1994), 58-59.
6. John B. Polhill, Acts, vol. 26 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 366-67.
7. Buchsel, 933.
8. “Underworld” in Oswalt, 293-95.
9. *Gorgias*, 523-27, in Plato, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato* [Plato], ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 303-307.
10. Helen F. North, “Death and Afterlife in Greek Tragedy and Plato” in *Death and Afterlife: Perspectives of World Religions*, ed. Hiroshi Obayashi (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 58-63; Grant and Hazel, 193.
11. *Phaedo* 112-115 in Plato, 93-95; Oswalt, 293.
12. Grant and Hazel, 193.
13. *Phaedo* 112-115 in Plato, 93-95; “Underworld” in Oswalt, 293-94.
14. In Cicero, *On the Nature of the Gods*, 2.10-12, the author describes the emphasis on correct procedures during governmental activities in order to stave off the wrath of the gods. See also Shelton, 380; and James F. Lewis and William G. Travis, *Religious Traditions of the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 69, 74-75.
15. Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 851.
16. Parker, 315-18.
17. Jewett, 839-40.
18. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 846-48; Paul J. Achtemeier, *Romans* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 216-17.
19. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans* 9-16, vol. 38B in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word Books, 1988), 809.
20. *Sibylline Oracles* 2:268-270, cited in Jewett, 851; see *The Sibylline Oracles*, trans. Milton S. Terry (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1899), 19.
21. Robert H. Mounce, *Romans*, vol. 27 in *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1995), 254-55.
22. Joachim Jeremias, “ᾗδης” [*hades*, *hades*] in TDNT, vol. 1 (1964), 146-49; “Hades” in W. E. Vines, *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words*, ed. F. F. Bruce, in *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words* (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1981), 187-88.

Steve W. Lemke is provost and professor of philosophy and ethics at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, New Orleans, Louisiana, and Director of the Baptist Center for Theology and Ministry, and Editor of *The Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry*.