The Pagan World
Ancient Religions before Christianity
Course Guidebook

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THE PAGAN WORLD
ANCIENT RELIGIONS BEFORE CHRISTIANITY

The pagan world often seems like an alien landscape when compared to modern religion. Not only did pagan religious traditions lack revealed texts and rigid belief systems, but they also incorporated cultic practices into daily life in ways that would astonish and confuse the contemporary worshiper. Yet for thousands of years before the time of Jesus, pagan religions flourished and gave rise to some of the most vibrant cultures the world has ever seen.

This course examines the religious and cultural practices of the pagan world—from the Stone Age to the rise of Christianity. The course begins with the early religions of Mesopotamia. You’ll discover how figures like Marduk and Tiamat set a pattern that will be repeated in other Indo-European cultures. Then, you will explore parts of the *Rigveda* and other ancient Indian texts and gain important insights about the relationship between gods and humanity. Next, the course moves on to the state religion of ancient Egypt, which would have a great influence on many other Mediterranean cultures.

The next several lectures pay particular attention to the religions of the Greeks. This will entail going beyond mythology to everyday practices: the worship of household and local gods; sacrificial rites; and prayers, vows, divination, and omens. You’ll visit Delphi and other important Greek sanctuaries and examine important cult practices and mystery religions. After addressing some philosophical criticisms of paganism, as well as the details of funerary rites in Greek religion, this section concludes with an examination of Egypt’s influence on Greek religion, which also affected Roman religion.
The remainder of the course focuses mostly on Rome. You’ll begin with early Roman ancestor worship and then discover how this evolved into a complex system of household and state gods. You will learn about the priests and ceremonies that were commonplace in the Roman Republic and consider the crucial role religion played in Roman politics and warfare. You’ll also discover how Romans reacted to foreign religions, accepting some while rejecting and even persecuting others. And you’ll examine how Romans structured time using a complex calendar of sacred and secular days.

A few lectures are spent on the life and eventual deification of Julius Caesar, who marks a turning point in Roman religion by establishing the practice of emperor worship that would continue until the end of the empire. You’ll experience some of Roman paganism’s rivals, such as Zoroastrianism and various cults from around the Mediterranean world. Finally, you will explore Rome’s interaction with Judaism and how the rise of Christianity ultimately led to the end of paganism.

These lectures place special emphasis on how pagan religions defined their cultures, from dress and eating habits to politics and warfare. The course concludes with a look at how Christianity both defied and reflected the pagan world from which it emerged.
EARLY PAGAN RELIGION IN MESOPOTAMIA
Although this course will focus on the classical Mediterranean religions of Greece and Rome, those religions are put in their wider cultural context by beginning with Mesopotamia, Egypt, and ancient India, whose religions either directly influenced later Greco-Roman developments or, in the case of ancient India, shared a common linguistic and religious inheritance. Divergent as the subsequent paths of their religious trajectories may have been, this common inheritance offers fascinating parallels and comparative evidence. As Rome grew to encompass the entire Mediterranean, these diverse peoples and their religious traditions came to inhabit, thanks to Rome’s aggressive warfare, a shared cultural space. Some of the oddities that resulted include that the god of ancient Israel, in the shape of a new religion, eventually conquered the entire Roman Empire and thus extinguished all the many gods and diverse traditions within it. This story—the end of Mediterranean paganism*—will be part of our story, too.

ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIAN CIVILIZATIONS

The beginnings of agricultural and urban organization can be found in the ancient Near East along, between, and around two major rivers: the Tigris and the Euphrates. *Mesopotamia†* is a convenient geographic term that serves as a catchall for the various civilizations and cultures that flourished in this region.

* The word *pagan* is a derogative term that was invented by Christians to disparage polytheistic adversaries. It derives from the Latin word *pagus*, or “countryside.” A *paganus* (or, feminine, *pagana*) was someone who lived in a rural district, not in the city where Christianity first flourished. For an urban Christian to call a non-Christian “pagan” was the equivalent of calling someone a rustic, yokel, peasant, hillbilly, or rube. It was never meant as a compliment.

What, then, should we call these people? What did they call themselves?

They did not have a name for themselves. They had no need for a name. Their religion was woven into all aspects of their daily lives, as their gods were everywhere all the time.

† The word *Mesopotamia* derives from Greek, *mesos* and *potamos*, meaning “mid–river.”
These civilizations include the Sumerians, who were the most southern and the most ancient; the Babylonians, who wrote in a Semitic language known as Akkadian; the Assyrians, a less ancient but closely related Semitic people who adopted Babylonian religion; and the Hittites, an Indo-European people centered in Anatolia (modern-day Turkey).

The Assyrians were to the Babylonians as the Romans were to the Greeks. The Assyrians were very religious, interested in all religions, and—although they are often dismissed as warlike and unoriginal—it is to their interest in collecting ancient texts that we owe much of our knowledge.

These cultures are ancient, but how ancient? Sumerian culture dates back to 3400 BCE. Old Akkadian, the most ancient Semitic language, dates to 2300 BCE. The Hebrews did not settle Palestine until the 1200s BCE, and the House of David did not rule until the 900s BCE. The Hebrew Bible is early modern in comparison with these texts. And the Greeks and Romans are even closer to the present.

**THE MESOPOTAMIAN CREATION EPIC**

A text called the *Enuma elish* tells the story of creation and introduces us to the mythology and religion of Mesopotamia, a tradition that offers striking parallels with later mythologies and traditions and thus seems to have exerted a strong influence on them.
The text derives from the library of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal, who reigned from 668 to 627 BCE. His library in Nineveh collected large numbers of religious texts written in cuneiform on clay tablets. Upon the collapse of his empire, the library was buried in the sands until it was uncovered by modern archeologists.

These texts include such stories as the Creation Epic, the Epic of Gilgamesh, the earliest account of the Flood (more famous in the later version featuring Noah), and “The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld,” as well as liturgies, prayers, hymns, chants to be sung at various festivals, ritual texts, incantations and spells, omen texts, astrological texts, and instructions for divination.

The Creation Epic, or Enuma elish, can be summarized as follows.

In the beginning, there was water: Tiamat (salt water) and her male counterpart, Apsu (fresh water). Tiamat was supreme. Their son was Mummu. Next arose their son Anshar and their daughter Kishar, who in turn begot a son, Anu, who became the supreme god. Anu had a son, Ea, who was wiser than all other gods up to this point.

The younger gods enjoyed rowdy times together. The older gods, including Tiamat, could not sleep. The young gods would not listen to Apsu, who suggested that they keep quiet.

Instructions for divination allow priests, for example, to interpret the flight of birds, the appearance of livers in animals that have been sacrificed, or strange celestial phenomena.
Apsu and Apsu’s son Mummu argued that they, together with Tiamat, should destroy the rowdy younger gods. The plot was no secret, so Ea created a magic circle to protect the younger gods and used a magic spell to render Apsu and Mummu defenseless.

Ea killed Apsu and led Mummu around by a rope that he had placed through Mummu’s nose. Ea then begot Marduk, who was far superior to all other gods.

Meanwhile, Anu kicked up some winds, disturbing Tiamat’s waters. She became angry once again. Kingu, one of her children, again proposed destroying the disruptive gods, adding to their argument the need to avenge Apsu and Mummu. Tiamat agreed, and she created monsters and gave Kingu the tablets of destiny—that is, the power of Anu (the old sky god§).

Ea informs his father, Anu, and his grandfather, Anshar, that Tiamat, Kingu, and company are plotting the destruction of the younger gods. Ea and his father Anu are too scared to face Tiamat and Kingu. Marduk is then elected supreme commander in an assembly of the gods. Why do the gods elect Marduk? Marduk demonstrates his powers through magic.

The gods say:

Lord, truly thy decree is first among gods. Say but to wreck or create; it shall be. Open thy mouth: the cloth will vanish! Speak again, and the cloth shall be whole!

§ Many of the struggles in this story revolve around who will be in charge—who will control destiny. We could pause here and read the myth at this simple level. The myth mirrors human concerns. Humans struggle for power; the gods struggle for power. Human families do not get along; the gods do not get along. Or, on a societal level, we see a political struggle for power: one group or one people versus others and their leaders. There is obviously a gender dimension. The leader of one group is female and that of the other is male. We neglect nature; we hear much of raging waters and winds. The gods are the air, the sun, the earth. Perhaps we’re dealing merely with metaphors for nature and storm.
At the word of his mouth, the cloth vanishes. He speaks again, and the cloth is restored. When the gods, his fathers, see the fruit of his word, joyfully they do homage: “Marduk is king!”

Marduk then receives scepter, throne, and vestment—that is, the symbols of power—as well as “matchless weapons.”

Marduk captures Tiamat with a net, uses herbs to resist her poison, and uses lightning to immobilize her. He harnesses winds to his chariot to face the monsters, places a halo on his head, smears his lips with red lipstick (a magical protection), and calls on his magic weapon, the thunderstorm.

Kingu is terrified by Marduk’s brilliance. Marduk scolds Tiamat for not loving her children, and Marduk attacks:

When Tiamat opens her mouth to consume him, he drives in the evil wind so that she cannot close her lips. As the fierce winds charges her belly, her body distends and her mouth is wide open. He releases the arrow, it tears her belly, it cuts through her insides, splitting the heart. Having thus subdued her, he extinguishes her life. He casts down her carcass to stand upon it. After he has slain Tiamat, the leader, her band is shattered, her troupe broken up; and the gods, her helpers who marched at her side [...] he makes captives.

A male god takes the place of a supreme female goddess. This may well reflect the displacement of a supreme goddess by a male usurper. It may also represent a paradigm for earthly gender relations.
Marduk tramples on the demons and takes the tablets of destiny and fastens them on his chest. He mutilates Tiamat’s body to create the earth, sky, and rivers:

The lord treads on the legs of Tiamat, with his unsparing mace he crushes her skull. When the arteries of her blood he has severed, the north wind bears it to places undisclosed. On seeing this, his fathers are joyful and jubilant, they bring gifts of homage to him. Then the lord pauses to view her dead body, that he may divide the monster and do artful works. He splits her like a shellfish into two parts: half of her he sets up [...] as sky.

Marduk organizes the universe and distributes tasks to his followers. He turns demons into statues as memorials and warnings to those who would revolt.

Marduk then turns to the creation of a temple to provide the gods with all their needs: Babylon.

Ea suggests killing Kingu and using his blood to make slaves for the gods:

Blood will I mass and cause bones to be. I will establish a savage, “human” shall be their name. Verily, savage-humans I will create. They shall be charged with service of the gods, so that gods may be at ease.**

With the temple of Babylon completed, the gods gather within its walls and celebrate. They receive the rites of religious worship and incense.

Marduk puts an end to the chaos of Tiamat, whose salt waters were originally mingled with the fresh waters of Apsu. Marduk has killed, cut, divided, and organized the parts. Her chaos is replaced by the order of Marduk.

** We discover that the purpose of human beings is to worship the gods, but, we may ask, do gods truly benefit from human services? The Babylonians seem to have thought so, as would many other traditionally religious peoples around the Mediterranean.
THE MYTH IN CONTEXT

- The simplest way to read this myth is that chaos, or disorder, yields to cosmos, or order. The identification of the female gender with disorder and the male with order is a recurring pattern.

- The *Enuma elish* is also a classic example of succession myth: One generation of gods supplants, or succeeds, the previous generation. Eventually, Marduk emerges the supreme god.

- The *Enuma elish* is also etiologic myth—that is, it explains the *aitios*, or the reason or cause of something. It explains the origin of the world, the divine hierarchy, the reason and purpose of human life, and the origins and purpose of religious worship.

- This Creation Epic was also part of an autumn festival of the New Year that lasted 12 days. The *Enuma elish* was read during this festival, during which the high priest also stripped the king of his royal insignia. The king was slapped in the face, his ears were pulled, and he was made to kneel before Marduk. After this, his royal insignia was restored. If the slap made the king cry, Marduk was propitious. The king was then once more vested with his royal authority.

- In its own time, the *Enuma elish* was thus a text that helped establish a religious context for the Babylonian state and its system. This Creation Epic explains the origin of the world, its organization, and humanity’s place in it and provides an effective pattern by which to combat evil forces: Society, whether divine or human, selects a strongman, a divine king like Marduk. The king becomes the representative of Marduk. All human beings will have their place in the social hierarchy, just as all gods have theirs. It all depends on who controls destiny—that is, who has the tablets.

- By the time the Greeks enter history, Mesopotamian religious culture has already long been a common inheritance of the Mediterranean. Typically, though, when cultures borrow from each other, the culture that borrows adapts what it takes for its own purposes.
For the purposes of this course, we can draw this lesson: A text that may be read purely as a story—as myth—enjoyed deeper connections to the religion, rituals, and politics of the society from which it derives. These connections become clearer in historical context. To trace pagan religions will require us to keep track of history, too, at least to the extent that historical facts are available to us.

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

1. Do you believe that we can draw secure conclusions about prehistoric peoples’ religions from their burial practices or the various objects that we can recover through archaeological excavations? How necessary, in your view, are written records for reconstructing a religion?

2. The civilizations of ancient Mesopotamia likely had more impact and influence on subsequent Mediterranean (including Greek) civilizations than we are likely ever to recover. What factors, in your opinion, lead to our neglect of these histories?

3. Marduk, like other sky gods we will encounter, demonstrates his authority through threats and physical violence, most dramatically in this instance against a mother goddess (here, Tiamat). Why do you think this might represent such a common pattern?
THE RIGVEDA AND THE GODS OF ANCIENT INDIA
Ancient India shares a linguistic inheritance with both Greece and Rome, and—judging from the names of their gods as well as many of their common religious practices—they share a religious inheritance, too. But there is a major difference between the religions of Mesopotamia, ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome and the ancient religions of India. The many gods of Babylon, ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome have been dead for thousands of years. In India, however, the many ancient gods of the Rigveda survive, despite great changes.

VEDIC RELIGION

With regard to the gods of ancient India as represented in the Rigveda, we possess no historical narratives, and the archaeological record is poor. The writings we do have often refer to historical events, but no chronology or firm dates can be given. What can we say, then, of history?

Speakers of Sanskrit, a branch of the Indo-European family of languages, entered India around 1500 BCE from the northwest and, in the process, inaugurated the Vedic period, which lasted until the 6th century BCE. They recorded their religious and mythological beliefs in their native language.

What excites scholars of religion is that the gods, rites, and religion represented in the Vedas show significant parallels with the gods, rites, and religions of the ancient Greeks and Romans.

* One of the great discoveries of the 19th century was the close relationship of the classical languages of Greek and Latin not only to each other and most other European languages, but also to Sanskrit (and thus such modern Indian languages as Hindi, which is derived from Sanskrit). The term Indo-European describes a geographical reality. The languages of this family were, before Columbus and the colonial expansion of Europe, originally spoken from India to Europe.

† Even this brief sketch contains much that is controversial. Dates as well as various linguistic issues are disputed. Struggles over who owns what particular aspect of ancient Indian history and just how ancient the Rigveda is are contested by scholars from around the world.

‡ The term Veda is related to the Latin word video, “I see.”
We possess, then, written sacred texts without accompanying historical documentation. This literature divides into two great periods: a Vedic period and a classical period. The Vedic period lasts from approximately 1500 BCE to approximately 500 BCE and uses an older form of Sanskrit. The classical period arises, on the other hand, when Sanskrit is no longer a spoken language but instead serves as a medium for educated discussion and instruction, as Latin did in Europe during the Middle Ages. This period extends from 500 BCE to 1000 CE. During the classical period, the writings—and thus religion—of the Vedic period are rendered obsolete. Vedic religion is transformed into Hinduism, and it is to these writings of the classical period to which one turns for the origins of Hinduism.

The Vedas are themselves the collections of sacred knowledge (acquired through divine revelation) that form the foundation of the Brahmanic, or priestly, system of religious belief. They are called the shruti (“heard”), or divinely inspired literature. The Vedas are less well known and studied in modern India, which tends to rely on the later classical literature known as smriti (“remembered”), or traditional literature.

There are four divisions in the Vedas:

- The Rigveda, or lore of praise, consists of some 1,028 hymns grouped in 10 books, or “circles,” called mandalas. The most important gods can be judged by the number of hymns addressed to each. The sky god Indra receives more than 250 hymns; Agni, lord of fire, some 200; and Soma, god of intoxication, more than 100.
- The Samaveda is the lore of tunes or chants.
- The Yajurveda is the lore of prayer or sacrificial formulas.
- The Atharvaveda is the lore of the Atharvans, a priestly family. This Veda is not as old or distinguished as the first three, but like them, it is a collection of hymns. It also contains many spells that are thought, despite the later date of composition, to represent an earlier stage of religious thinking.
Together, these collections of mainly poetical texts of a devotional nature constitute the path of threefold wisdom, *trayi vidya*: hymn, tune (or chant), and prayer.

The *Rigveda* is thought to have absorbed many of the gods of the people conquered by Sanskri speakers and whose images have been found in the ruins of the Indus civilization. The interpretation of these texts, however, eventually passed into the hands of a priesthood, thus paving the way for transition from an original Vedic religion to Brahmanic Hinduism. The gods retain their names but have different emphases.

A significant feature of the modified Vedic religion is the importance of priests called Brahmans. They are the authors of the Brahmanas, priestly writings that explain the earlier Vedas and Vedic ritual. They claim to explain the mystical meaning of the Vedas and to provide instructions regarding ritual. These writings reduced the once-active gods of the *Rigveda* to divine forces subject to the ritual machinations of priests. The power of the priest in Vedic religion is similar in many ways to the place of the priest in the ancient (pagan) religion of Rome, who was similarly charged with performing religious rituals with complete accuracy.

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§ While *Brahma* was a creator god and part of the Hindu trinity of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva, the word *Brahman*, sometimes spelled *Brahmin*, can mean priest. In different contexts, *Brahman* can also refer to prayer or to a prayer spell in the *Rigveda* as well as to the power behind the prayer and to the ultimate impersonal power behind the universe—that is, the one force animating all reality. And the priestly writings were called Brahmanas.

¶ Great importance was attached to the correct performance of sacrifice. The ritual had to be correct.
Vedic religion was polytheistic with a decidedly masculine flavor.** There were, according to various statements in the *Rigveda*, somewhere between 33 and 3,339 different gods, depending on who is counting. The religious practices one encounters in this text center mainly on the ritual slaughter of animals†† and drinking an intoxicating beverage called soma.

**ANCIENT INDIAN GODS**

Indra, the Vedic equivalent of Roman Jupiter, was born to kill Vritra, the serpent. Crushing the serpent released the waters of the earth and allowed for creation of sunrise and sunset. Surrounded by young and handsome warrior gods who sing his praises, Indra was originally the most important of the gods. His position, however, was later usurped. Indra’s divine drink was soma, a beverage that could cause severe drunkenness.

Rigveda doctrine is not settled, and there is much room for speculation—as there is, of course, in other traditions, too.

** In comparing Indo-European religions with other traditions, one notes a correspondence between the patriarchal organization of Indo-European peoples and the male-dominated divinities that populated their heavens. That said, when we read myths from Greece and Rome, we do find some evidence that the masculine divinities of the Indo-Europeans replaced earlier mother goddesses. Some have argued that Vedic religion did the same to the goddesses of the prior Indus civilization. That said, mother goddesses did not disappear, and while the divinities of Greece and Rome yielded to the singular and masculine divinity of monotheism, in India the male-dominated pantheon would gradually yield space to reemerging mother goddesses around 650 CE.

†† Animal sacrifice was a ritual that was pervasive not just in the *Rigveda*, but in ancient Mediterranean religion as well.
Other gods of interest include Varuna, who, like Greek Poseidon and Roman Neptune, was a god of waters, earthquakes, and justice. Surya, god of the sun, may be compared with Greek Helios and Roman Sol; Chandra, god of the moon, with Greek Selene and Roman Luna. Vedic Vishwakarma was like Greek Hephaistos and Roman Vulcan; the Aswins were like the twins Castor and Pollux (also known as the Dioscuri). Ganesha has been compared to Janus; Balarama with Bacchus; Kartikeya with Ares and Mars; Durga with Hera and Juno; Sarasvati with Athena and Minerva; Sri with Aphrodite and Venus; and Kama with Eros and Cupid.

Consider a short hymn entitled “Hymn to All the Gods”:

Not one of you, gods, is small, not one a little child; all of you are truly great. Therefore you are worthy of praise and of sacrifice, you thirty-three gods of Manu, arrogant and powerful. Protect us, help us and speak for us; do not lead us into the distance far away from the path of our father Manu. You gods who are all here and who belong to all men, give far-reaching shelter to us and to our cows and horses.

This hymn informs us that all the gods are great and that they are therefore worthy of praise and sacrifice. The gods are further characterized as arrogant and powerful, and this is why the hymn calls on the gods for protection for human beings and their animals.

Relations between humans and gods thus appear to be two-way. We have something they want—sacrifice and praise—and they have something in turn that we want: protection. Other hymns help us understand how this reciprocal relationship came about. To understand it, we must understand the creation of the universe.
THE CREATION OF THE UNIVERSE

- In Nasadiya, “The Hymn of Creation,” from the 10th book of the Rigveda, the problem of existence is tackled by piling up paradoxes.

- The first three verses describe chaos, darkness, and water.

  There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond. What stirred? Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomlessly deep?

- We subsequently learn that the life force arises through the power of heat. Desire is described as the seed of mind, and poets explore meaning. The gods came only later; the gods are thus subsidiary to the whole of creation. A question arises: Since the gods came only later, who knows whence this whole creation arose? The final verse tells us that perhaps creation formed itself, or perhaps the highest god knows how creation arose, but perhaps not.

  Whence this creation has arisen—perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not—the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows—or perhaps he does not.

- First beginnings present a real problem. Science cannot answer the question of where everything came from in the first place. The Rigveda, like modern science, confesses its ignorance before this insoluble problem.

- Another hymn from the 10th book, entitled “The Unknown God, the Golden Embryo,” takes a slightly different approach and offers a more substantial answer.

  The many and ancient gods in the Rigveda have had their devotees longer than the gods of any other historically documented religion. We should consequently accord these gods the same circumspection we might accord the God of Judaism, of Christianity, or of Islam—rather than considering them myths of the distant past.
Rather than tackle creation, this hymn explores the origin of the creator. German philologist Max Müller described the god of this hymn as the *deus ignotus* (“unknown god”) because of the question continually posed and repeated at the end of nine of 10 verses:

Who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation?‡‡

Aside from this pressing question, we glean a few answers as well. In the first verse, a golden embryo arises:

In the beginning the Golden Embryo arose. Once he was born, he was the one lord of creation. He held in place the earth and this sky.

The other gods obey him. His shadow is immortality and death. One king of the world breathes, blinks, and rules all animals, including human beings. He created physical reality, including the river that separates demons from the world of gods and men. He separated physical space and set up the sun to prop up the sky. He had an embryo, or egg, when the high waters came and brought forth sacrifice as a means to maintain creation. Eventually, in the final verse, we discover the name of this god who was pregnant with the whole world and thus creator of the whole world:

Prajāpati, lord of progeny, no one but you embraces all these creatures. Grant us the desires for which we offer you oblation. Let us be lords of riches.

According to the scholar Manfred Lurker, when one sets up a fire altar, one recreates the body of Prajāpati, thus in effect helping to prop up the sky. Hence, the question was no idle question.

Who is the god whom we should worship with the oblation? The one who first separated the sky from the earth and keeps it from crashing on our heads!

‡‡ An offering from a human being to a god.
THE ORIGIN OF SACRIFICE

The Purusasukta, or “The Hymn of Man,” represents yet another explanation of the origin of earth and human beings. Its basic action involves the dismemberment of a cosmic giant, Purusa. This giant man Purusa also serves as a sacrifice performed by the gods themselves:

When the gods spread the sacrifice with the Man as the offering, spring was the clarified butter, summer the fuel, autumn the oblation.

We are told further that the man was anointed and laid out on sacred grass, which is the equivalent of an altar. The gods and the sages then perform the sacrifice together, and this paradigmatic sacrifice becomes the origin of the world as well as religion:

From that sacrifice in which everything was offered, the melted fat was collected, and he made it into those beasts who live in the air, in the forest, and in villages.
From that sacrifice in which everything was offered, the verses and chants were born, the metres were born from it, and from it the formulas were born. Horses were born from it, and those other animals that have two rows of teeth; cows were born from it, and from it goats and sheep were born.

The giant man’s body is then further divided. The mouth becomes Brahmin (the priestly class), the arms become warriors, the thighs become people, and the feet become servants. The moon is formed from the mind, the eye becomes the sun, and wind comes from breath. From the navel comes the middle realm of space, from the head comes sky, and from the two feet comes the earth.

After the body has been disposed of, we learn the central role that sacrifice plays in the whole divine system:

With the sacrifice the gods sacrificed to the sacrifice. These were the first ritual laws. These very powers reached the dome of the sky where dwell the Sādhyas, the ancient gods.

Why would gods sacrifice to a sacrifice? These are the first laws—that is, sacrifice stands at the beginning and at the center. Each sacrifice becomes a recapitulation of an original sacrifice, and each subsequent sacrifice will contribute to maintaining the order of creation as established by the sacrifice of the giant man from whose body the world was made.

A hymn entitled “The Creation of the Sacrifice” takes another approach to explaining the origin (and purpose) of sacrifice.

The world itself originates from sacrifice, and sacrifice holds the world together.

That was the model for the human sages, our fathers, when the primeval sacrifice was born. With the eye that is mind, in thought I see those who were the first to offer this sacrifice.
The power of sacrifice rests in human hands; humans have the power to bring or withhold it. The gods desire, and the universe requires, sacrifice. Humans are thus empowered to obtain divine aid through their proper reenactment of ritual—the ritual that keeps the world together for both gods and humans.

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

1. Not only is the *Rigveda* comfortable with diverse versions of creation, it tends to pose more questions than it answers. What advantages might there be to a religious system that leaves room for doubt and speculation? Are there disadvantages?

2. Sacrifice is a central feature in pre-Christian pagan religions, and in the *Rigveda* serves as a primary model for the creation of the universe. What, in your opinion, is so religiously powerful in the concept of sacrifice?
STATE RELIGION IN ANCIENT EGYPT
Unlike India, where historical documentation is poor, we are better able to put the eminently practical religious texts of Egypt in historical context. Egyptian history is dominated by the Nile.* A large population was concentrated in the delta in the north, where the river empties into the Mediterranean. The Nile flows from south to north, and the Egyptians themselves distinguished between north and south. They called their country the Two Lands, a union of northern and southern territories. Seth, the god of the south, and Horus, the god of the north—who had their differences as well—reflect this geopolitical reality.

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN RELIGION AND HISTORY

 대하여 Before the advances of modern Egyptology, beginning in the early 1800s, knowledge about ancient Egypt was derived from the classical writers of Greece and Rome. The ancient Greeks acknowledged that they were themselves a young people in comparison with the Egyptians, whom they admired as the source of ancient wisdom. The Romans, too, were fascinated by Egypt and adorned their palaces with artwork they collected there.

 대하여 After the Roman conquest of Egypt, knowledge of the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic writing gradually faded, and from late antiquity—for more than 1,500 years—hieroglyphs remained indecipherable.

 위하여 During Napoleon’s attempt to conquer Egypt, however, a stone was found in 1799 near the town of Rosetta (or Rashid) that contained an inscription in two languages and three scripts: in hieroglyphs, in a less complicated demotic Egyptian script, and in Greek.†

* The Nile flows from Nubia (modern-day Sudan) and empties into the Mediterranean.
† This triple inscription passed, like so many antiquities, into British hands after the surrender of French forces in 1801 and today resides in the British Museum.
The Rosetta Stone commemorates the accession of Ptolemy V Epiphanes to the throne of Egypt in 196/197 BCE. Written by priests of Memphis, it describes Ptolemy’s benefactions to that priesthood—but more importantly, it established whole lists of Greek and hieroglyph equivalents. This key provided the foundation for translating thousands of surviving texts.

Egyptian literature and mythology survive mostly on papyri and ostraca. Texts were also written on pyramid walls and on coffins. These pyramid and coffin texts have allowed scholars to recover a great deal of religious lore.

These texts derive from a vast stretch of time. Prehistoric Egyptian history begins around 4500 BCE, with followers of Horus located in the north and followers of Seth in the south. The pharaoh thus wore a double crown that commemorated the union of these two regions. Despite the division, religion and language served to unify.

† Bits of pottery or limestone bearing inscriptions.
§ The central figure of the pharaoh was not just a king, but also—and more importantly—a god among gods, the living son of the sun god Re. He was called the “good god” and wore insignia signifying his divinity. He lived in constant communion with fellow gods, performing daily rituals in temples, conversing with his fellow gods in dreams, and interpreting their messages for human subjects. The pharaoh provided the essential link between gods and humans. His welfare was thus essential to the welfare of his people, and his person was sacrosanct. This is a concept that would inspire imitation among Greeks and Romans.
The Archaic Period, which lasted from the late 4th to the 3rd millennium BCE, sees advances in brick and masonry building. This is followed by the Old Kingdom, the first great age of pyramid building. Religious worship shifts from Horus to Re (the sun god) as the ancestor of the pharaohs. Which deity is considered supreme will depend on contemporary politics.

After the Old Kingdom dissolves into civil wars, there is a gap in the record, which we call the First Intermediate Period. The city of Thebes then emerges to dominate the country. There is more civil disruption, resulting in a Second Intermediate Period. There is foreign domination by a mysterious group called the Hyksos, whose overthrow ushered in the New Kingdom, and we have barely arrived at the 1500s BCE.

A century later, the reign of Amenhotep III institutes a monumental building program at Thebes, Luxor, and Karnak. And Amenhotep III’s son was Akhnaton, born Amenhotep IV. Akhnaton had been a high-priest of the sun god Re-Horus at Heliopolis. But he changed his name from Amenhotep (“Amon is satisfied”) to Akhnaton (“It pleases Aton”) and abolished all the old gods in favor of the sun god Aton, who was conceived of as the visible source of life, creation, growth, and activity.

Akhnaton’s religious preferences meant that temple funds were diverted to the new god Aton, who then received temples, priests, and other attentions. Those who converted to Aton were rewarded, but this early attempt at monotheism did not last. After Akhnaton’s death, the worship of all the old gods was revived. Akhnaton’s obsession with religious affairs also weakened the country politically.

Josephus, a Jewish writer who wrote in Greek sometime in the 1st century CE, thought the Hyksos were Israelites.
Internal weakness in Egypt led in 1075 BCE first to Libyan and subsequently to Cushite (or Ethiopian) domination. This lasted for some 400 years, until 671 BCE, when the Assyrians under Ashurbanipal conquered Egypt.

There is one last period of native Egyptian rule from 664 until 525 BCE, when the Persians conquer Egypt. The Persians rule Egypt for almost two centuries, until 332 BCE, when Alexander the Great reaches Alexandria. After Alexander’s death, Macedonian-Greek kings rule Egypt, beginning with Ptolemy I, and the Ptolemaic dynasty rules Egypt until Caesar Augustus arrives to deal with Cleopatra, former lover of his great-uncle Julius Caesar and the last of the Ptolemies. Direct Roman rule begins with the suicide of Cleopatra in 30 BCE and lasts until the triumph of the Arabs in 642 CE.

The earliest religion of the Egyptians seems to have originated in the worship of spirits of nature embodied in sacred animals. Good spirits were embodied in useful animals like cows or rams; menacing spirits were embodied in animals like crocodiles or cobras. This aspect of Egyptian religion—the worship of gods in the form of animals, or theriolatry—served as a major point of contrast between the religion of the Egyptians and others around the Mediterranean.

Later, when the Ptolemies sought to unite Greek and Egyptian worship, they fastened on Osiris to appeal to Greeks (as Osiris appears in human form) and Apis (who appears as a bull) to appeal to Egyptians. They united the two as Osiris-Apis, or, as this syncretic god was later known, Serapis.
EGYPTIAN DIVINITIES

Instead of being designed to tell a story or even explain creation, a pyramid text that dates from around 2300 BCE intended to proclaim, declare, and thus establish the immortality of the pyramid on which it was inscribed, as well as of the pharaoh who would eventually dwell within it.

Here’s the first stanza:

O Atum-Kheprer, thou who wast on high on the primeval hill; thou didst arise as the ben-bird in the house of Heliopolis; thou didst spit out what was Shu, thou didst sputter out what was Tefnut. Thou didst put thy arms about them as the arms of a ka, for thy ka was in them.

The hymn addresses the creator god Atum, who is self-created and rises like a bird from primordial chaos. Atum is able to spit out the god Shu, or air, and Tefnut, or moisture, because of his ka, or spiritual strength.

A subsequent verse invokes the nine great gods, or Ennead, of Heliopolis:

O Great Ennead which is in Heliopolis, Atum, Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephthys, whom Atum begot, spreading wide his heart in joy at his begetting you in your name of the Nine Bows, may there be none of you who will separate himself from Atum, as he protects this King […], as he protects this construction work—from all gods and from all dead, and as he guards lest anything happen to him evilly throughout the course of eternity.

The point of the hymn is to protect that pharaoh and the pyramid, not to teach readers about the Ennead. We learn only inadvertently that Atum created himself as well as these nine great gods.

Fortunately, this is not the only text that describes Atum’s creation of the world.
Another text is excerpted from the 17th chapter of the Book of the Dead, a text dating back to at least 2000 BCE. This was a collection of spells written on papyri buried with a mummified corpse to help the dead person's spirit navigate the next world. Again, we deal with a text composed for other, practical purposes that only incidentally informs us about Atum's creation.

Here’s the second stanza:

I am Atum when I was alone in Nun (the primordial waters of chaos); I am Re (the sun) in his first appearances, when began to rule that which he had made.

Atum reveals himself as the first god and the one who arose from chaos. He then explains that he created himself:

I am the great god who came into being by himself.

He identifies himself with the great sun god Re and then claims credit for creating the other nine great gods of the Ennead:

He who created his names, the Lord of the Ennead.

Here, “he” refers to Re, who created the names of the parts of his body. That is how these gods who follow him came into being. In other words, Atum-Re accomplished the creation by naming the other gods. He spoke the world into existence.

The origin of Atum-Re on a primordial hill in the midst of waters from which post he speaks the other gods into existence offers a parallel to the God of the Book of Genesis:

God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters.
Subsequent stanzas give further details. Atum explains that he is also Re, the sun god, and that not only was he present before anything else, but he created everything. He is also the most powerful god, or as Atum puts it:

I am he among the gods who cannot be repulsed.

Finally, Atum claims that in addition to creating the world and everything in it, he knows the future:

I am yesterday, while I know tomorrow.

This creation text offers a satisfactory explanation as to why Atum, of all gods, should be the supreme god. It tells us how the world came into being. And for Heliopolis, the text was convenient, too, as their city served as the site of the creation of the universe. As Atum’s city, they enjoyed a political preeminence sanctioned by the Lord of Creation.

When the city of Memphis rose to preeminence, however, they preferred to raise their city’s own god to the top spot. His name was Ptah, and in their temple, they installed a stone that told the story of Ptah and that corrected the record. The stone, **called the Shabaka Stone, offers a fascinating glimpse of ex post facto mythmaking in the service of politics.

The text, which was inscribed around 700 BCE, begins by claiming to be a fresh copy of a much older document:

Now his majesty […] found [this text] as something which the ancestors had made but which was worm-eaten. It was unknown from beginning to end. Then his majesty copied it anew, so that it is better than its state formerly.

The text then proceeds to give Ptah a place in the story of creation. Atum is not erased. Instead, Ptah is simply inserted into the story ahead of Atum as the god who created Atum, as well as all the other nine great gods of the Ennead:

** Today, the Shabaka Stone is housed in the British Museum in London.
Ptah [...] the father who begot Atum; Ptah [...], the mother who bore Atum; Ptah the Great, who is the heart and tongue of the Ennead; Ptah [...] gave birth to the gods!

The text does reduce Atum’s accomplishments, however, by ascribing a biological basis to them and thus dismisses Atum’s Ennead. Ptah’s own Ennead, on the other hand, is the result of Ptah’s mind’s will, which Ptah expressed in words:

[T]he Ennead of Ptah [...] is the teeth and lips in his mouth, which pronounced the name of everything, from which Shu (air) and Tefnut (moisture) came forth, and which was the fashioner of the Ennead.

The power of the word thus belongs not to Atum, but to Ptah. After dispensing with Ptah’s rival’s claim to supremacy, Ptah describes his role in creating the gods:

Thus all the gods were formed and his Ennead was completed. Indeed, all the divine order really came into being through what the heart thought and the tongue commanded.

Not only did Ptah create the gods, but he contrived what nourishment the gods would receive as well as the land, Egypt, from which the gods would receive all good things. This, too, is why Ptah is greater than the rest:

Ptah was he who made all and brought the gods into being. He is indeed the one who brought forth the gods, for everything came from him, nourishment and provisions, the offerings of the gods and every good thing. [...] And so Ptah was satisfied after he had made everything as well as all the divine order.

Ptah also organizes Egypt politically and puts the gods not only into their shrines, but also into the stone, clay, and wooden statues that represent them.
SITES OF CREATION

Memphis was not the last city to usurp the top spot. This designation goes to the city of Karnak, according to a text that dates to 310 BCE, and then to Thebes, which asserts its moment of supremacy by declaring that Thebes is actually the site of creation.

Thus, to assert its political supremacy, a city can declare that its site is the spot where the universe was created or that its god created the universe, or it can do both. Another use for myth is to create religious institutions that assist in maintaining such crucial aspects of creation as the circuit of the sun as well as the victory of political leaders over their enemies.

Mesopotamian and Egyptian myth and religion were deeply connected with the political machinery of advanced and highly organized societies. It will take the comparatively much less civilized Greeks and Romans some time to catch up to the social organization of their predecessors.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. We do not generally worry about where the sun goes after it sets or whether it will rise again and continue in its path as it did the day before. Our predecessors on this earth were no idiots, so it is our task to try to understand things from their perspective. What factors might have contributed to the sun’s prominent role in ancient religion in general and in Egyptian religion in particular? What political advantages might the Egyptian state have accrued in making solar religion a crucial service that the state provided to the gods on behalf of the people of Egypt?

2. We see very clearly expressed in Egyptian texts the power of words to create new realities. Gods speak the universe into existence. How much of our own world do we “speak into existence”? In other words, how much of the world in which we operate depends on the words that we use to define and regulate it?
FROM MYTH TO RELIGION: THE OLYMPIAN DEITIES
Although they are no longer worshipped, Greek gods and their stories have remained familiar. Homer’s name is famous, as are his epics, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. On the other hand, the poet Hesiod, Homer’s slightly younger contemporary, is perhaps not quite so famous outside classical circles. Hesiod wrote a poem entitled the *Theogony* (“Birth of the Gods”) that shows remarkable similarities to the myths of the ancient Mesopotamians.* Within two centuries of Hesiod’s poetry, the genres of history and the historiographical tradition join the literary and archaeological record, thus permitting us to place Hesiod’s writing and subsequent works in historical context.

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**ZEUS: ANGRY FATHER AND STRONGMAN**

- Like the Mesopotamian gods, the Greek gods are born in successive generations that supplant or succeed each other. The process is violent. Zeus, god of the thunderbolt, is, like Marduk and Jupiter, a sky god. Sky gods were once numerous, and supreme sky gods share similar characteristics: strongman, patriarch, or dictator over an unruly clan.

- The theology of the Bronze Age gods of Greece show deep similarities with the much earlier and more remote gods of Mesopotamia. Ouranos (sky) begets children with Gaia (earth) but then pushes them back into her womb, causing earth tremendous pain. She thus plots with her son Kronos to overthrow her oppressive consort.

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* Until recently, the stories of the ancient Mesopotamians lay unread on clay tablets for so long. Hesiod, by way of contrast, wrote in Greek, a language that has been in continuous use from his day to ours.
Hesiod tells us how it happened:

Huge Ouranos came, bringing night, in his longing he stretched all over Gaia, and spread himself out fully. Then Kronos from his ambush seized him with his left hand and with his right hand he held the enormous sickle with its jagged teeth, swung it and sliced through the genitals of his father.

It doesn’t stop there. Kronos, too, becomes tyrannical. Zeus, after enlisting his father’s enemies and fighting a 10-year war against the Titans, overthrows Kronos. The result is just another strongman.

Zeus may be just—this is what most sources allege—but he is also, in the end, a hotheaded bully whose anger must be avoided, averted, appeased, or suffered because his power is superior.

This brutal concept helps us understand the approach that the sea goddess Thetis takes when in the Iliad she appeals to Zeus on behalf of her son Achilles:

She found the son of Kronos, Zeus of the wide-resounding voice, sitting apart from all the rest of the gods, on the topmost perch of Olympus. She sat before him and held his knees with her left hand, but with her right, she grasped his chin and in supplication spoke to Zeus, the lordly son of Kronos.
To grasp the knees with the left arm and lift the right in supplication was to accept unconditional surrender, to throw oneself on the mercy of a superior force. Thus, Thetis abases herself before the supreme authority of Zeus.

Why such caution? Zeus is a god who gets angry. And this is a crucial lesson. Zeus is dangerous. If we cannot enlist his aid—a perilous prospect—we should at least not raise his ire. When Hera, Zeus’s sister and wife, later asks Zeus about his conference with Thetis, Zeus rebukes her:

You wily one, you are always thinking and never do I escape you; still, you will not be able to accomplish anything; in fact, you will be farther from my heart, which will be a worse situation for you. [...] Sit and be silent, and obey my word. For all the gods in Olympus will fail to protect you, when I lay my irresistible hands upon you!

When Hera tries to enlist the god of sleep in one of her plots, this god hesitates to lend his assistance to Hera, recalling another time he put Zeus to sleep:

Zeus awoke in a rage, and beat the gods in his house.

What are mere humans to do before such power? We find a more human approach to Zeus in an inscription from Crete that we can compare to this literary treatment of myth. The inscription dates from around 300 BCE but appears to represent older material. It represents a hymn of praise in which human beings humbly acknowledge the superior power of Zeus:

Hail Greatest Krouros, Kronian One, receive my greeting, thou Almighty of Radiance! Thou art come, leading the gods! Do thou come for the year to Dikte, and rejoice in this hymn; for there [the Kouretes, thy caretakers] took thee, the immortal child, from thy mother Rhea on their shields, and circling with their feet hid thee away!
In this human hymn of worship, we encounter myth, of course, but it is also combined with more certifiably religious elements. Rhea, Kronos’s consort and Zeus’s mother, entrusted the infant Zeus to the warlike deities called Kouretes. This is a story that derives from myth, but we can also connect the myth to religious practices. The Kouretes, who hid baby Zeus with their shields, drowned out his cries with their war chants, clanging spears, and war dances.

Ancient literature and this inscription thus combine to illuminate the personality of Zeus—he was an angry father and a strongman—as well as to signal some aspects of his worship through war dances.

**WORSHIP OF ZEUS ON EARTH**

Even in a place as small and remote as Greece, there were thousands of places where Zeus was worshipped: Every house—every city—had a Zeus, if not more than one. Each was recognizably Zeus, but at the same time, each was strictly local.

Each house had, in fact, at least two Zeuses: a Zeus Ktesios (“Zeus the Acquisitive” or “Zeus the Property Owner”), who protected the household’s property, stores, and treasure; and a Zeus Herkeios (“Zeus of the Fenced-In Area”), who was the Zeus of the entire area occupied by the house.

† Dance was an important element in ancient worship, from the war dances of men to the elaborate dances of women at civic religious festivals.
Were these petty Zeuses the same Zeus described by Homer or Hesiod? Would the Zeus of the *Iliad*—the mighty tyrant of Olympus—have cared about some petty family’s yard? Some scholars argue that these Zeuses should not be conflated with Olympian Zeus. They argue that some petty household god has usurped the Olympian’s name.

On the other hand, many monotheists believe that a single almighty god, creator of the universe and all that is in it, not only cares about and listens to their individual prayers, but also cares about the smallest details of their lives. In some ways, it seems simpler to divide a task like that among numerous divinities, and if Zeus can vary from place to place, why not from house to house as well?

In ancient Greek religion, one turned to different and specific deities for varying purposes. Epithets served to distinguish one Zeus from another. Olympian Zeus would not be confused with Zeus Ktesios. And one individual’s Zeus Ktesios was not the same Zeus Ktesios that looked over the neighbor’s treasure. They dwelled in different houses. Yet they were both Zeus Ktesios.

Cities, too, did not share their local Zeus. The Zeus who watched over one city was not the same Zeus who watched over another.

Whether he went by the Roman name Jupiter† or the Greek name Zeus, this sky god was worshipped under many names in many ways in countless places. Each was different—yet somehow also the same.

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† The Romans considered Jupiter the functional equivalent of Zeus.
TEMPLES OF ZEUS

The remains of some of the great temples and sanctuaries of Zeus, like the better-known myths about this Olympian, are still visible among us.

The Athenian tyrant Peisistratus began the colossal temple of Olympian Zeus in the 6th century BCE by knocking down the previous temple. His sons started construction in 520 BCE, but about 10 years later, they were expelled from Athens after completing only the platform and a few columns. The Athenian democracy did not approve of this massive monument to the tyrant among the sky gods, and they abandoned the project. The preeminent monument of Athenian democracy was, and arguably remains, Pericles’s Parthenon for Athena. For almost 400 years, Zeus’s temple remained a mere, albeit massive, platform.

Alas, nothing lasts forever, and Athens’ democracy eventually fell, conquered in 338 BCE on the fields of Chaeronea by Philip II of Macedon. After a brief rebellion following Philip’s assassination, Athens quickly submitted to the rule of his son Alexander the Great. Alexander’s rule was, in the various pieces of his empire, followed by a number of Greek-Macedonian dynasties, one of which was the Seleucid dynasty.

A Seleucid ruler by the name of Antiochus presented himself as the earthly embodiment of Zeus and revived the project in 174 BCE. Ten years after he began the project, and when the temple was about half built, the earthly embodiment of Zeus known as Antiochus died, and work halted once again in 164 BCE.

§ The temple’s design called for more than 100 columns. Of these, 15 columns remain in place today.
Eventually, almost 600 years after the Athenian tyrant Peisistratus began the project, the Roman emperor Hadrian completed Zeus’s temple, which he dedicated in 132 CE. The temple was subsequently badly damaged in 276 CE during an invasion, thus yielding a period of full glory that lasted 144 years.

Another famous Temple of Zeus is the Temple of Zeus Naios (“Zeus of the Sacred Spring”) at Dodona in a remote area of northwest Greece. This site was operative from the Mycenaean Bronze Age—before Homer and Hesiod—until the late Roman period. This Zeus shows us yet another of his many faces. Here, Zeus gave advice through his priestesses to those who asked. The priestesses interpreted the leaves on the oaks sacred to Zeus that rustled in the breeze. The oracle was—along with the oracle of Apollo at Delphi and the oracle of Zeus Ammon in Libya—one of the three great oracles of the ancient Greek world.
According to the historian Herodotus, who chronicled the wars between the Greeks and the Persians, all three oracles were Egyptian in origin:

The priests of Zeus** of Thebes told me that two priestesses had been carried away from Thebes by Phoenicians; one, they said they had heard was taken away and sold in Libya, the other in Greece; these women, they said, were the first founders of places of divination in both countries.

Though both the priestesses of Dodona and the priests of Egypt agree on the topic of Egyptian origin, modern scholars have decided that the certainty expressed by earlier scholars is less than certain. The ancient world was much more connected and global than scholars used to think.

Egypt’s influences, although difficult to trace, were likely many. The ancient Mediterranean world shared common conceptions about the way religion worked, and one such conception was a shared belief in the possibility of consulting the will of Zeus through divination. Experts could be found in oracular shrines in both Greece and Egypt.

** Zeus of Thebes was Ammon or Ammon–Ra, the sun god.

CONNECTIONS TO MYTH AND LITERATURE

In Homer’s *Iliad*, Zeus sends omens by means of his personal bird, the eagle, as well as in dreams. After Thetis had successfully supplicated Zeus and after Zeus has angrily put Hera in her place, Zeus contemplates a plan to help Thetis’s son Achilles win the glory that Zeus promised Thetis he would bestow. Zeus settles on a false dream. Homer tells us how it worked:

Now all the other gods and men, lords of chariots, slumbered the whole night through, but Zeus was not held by sweet sleep [...] And this plan seemed to his mind best, to send to Agamemnon, son of
Atreus, a baneful dream. He [...] addressed the Dream with winged words: “Up, go, thou baneful Dream, unto the swift ships of the Achaeans, and when thou art come to the hut of Agamemnon, son of Atreus [...] [b]id him arm the long-haired Achaeans with all speed, since now he may take the [...] city of the Trojans. For the immortals, who have homes upon Olympus, are no longer divided in counsel, since Hera hath convinced the minds of all by her supplication, and doom hangs over the Trojans.”

Was this Zeus the same Zeus whose oracle could be consulted at Dodona in northeast Greece? Perhaps it was.

Achilles invokes the Zeus of Dodona rather than Zeus on Olympus when he prays for the safety of his comrade Patroclus:

[Achilles] prayed, standing in his courtyard
Pouring out the wine as he looked up to heaven.
And as he prayed, Zeus in his thunderhead listened.
“Lord Zeus, God of Dodona, Pelasgian God
Who dwells afar in the snows of Dodona
With your barefoot priests who sleep
On the ground around your sacred oak:
As you have heard my prayer before
And did honor me and smite the Achaeans,
So now, too, fulfill my prayer.”

Homer continues:

Zeus in his wisdom heard Achilles’ prayer
And granted half of it. Yes, Patroclus
Would drive the Trojans back from the ships,
But he would not return from battle unharmed.
If this Zeus of Dodona were indeed distinct from Zeus on Olympus or the later Zeus of Athens, then this passage demonstrates that—at least in the religious worldview of Homer—a local Zeus in northwest Greece could effectively perform tasks in places far from his abode in Asia Minor on the beaches of Troy.

The oracle of Zeus at Dodona remained active for more than a thousand years and did not cease until all such pagan facilities were outlawed and shut down by Christian authorities.

With caution, it is appropriate to connect literary representations of Greek myth with examples of Greek religion that are better documented historically and archaeologically. There is remarkable continuity.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. The historian Herodotus often talks about connections between Egyptian and Greek religion. However, in the 19th century and for much of the 20th, ancient Greece was generally held up as a singular and isolated civilization. What factors do you think may have contributed to this myopic view?

2. Zeus is a violent god. Monotheists might perhaps consider such gods bizarre in comparison with a God who is perfect and just. But how might less-than-perfect deities help explain the way the world works according to a “common sense” perspective?
HOUSEHOLD AND LOCAL GODS IN ANCIENT GREECE
Zeus had companions on Olympus—such as Hera, his sister and wife—and the myths that describe these deities remain relatively well known to this day. But these are not the gods who dominated the daily lives of average Athenians and their families. Though we are better informed about their lives than the lives of ancient Greeks in other cities, religious life would have been similar elsewhere, as ample inscriptions and literary accounts attest.

**GODS OF THE HOUSE**

Let us abandon the rarefied airs of Olympus for the smoky hearths of a home, or oikos*, belonging to a freeborn Athenian citizen—that is, a male head of household, the one who was allowed to participate in public life and inherit and own property.

### Olympic Gods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>God</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hermes</td>
<td>messenger, liar, and thief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apollo</td>
<td>god of medicine and light</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artemis</td>
<td>a hunter and wild goddess of the moon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athena</td>
<td>severe in beauty and wisdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hephaistos</td>
<td>metalworker and handyman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ares</td>
<td>undiplomatic and bellicose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aphrodite</td>
<td>goddess of lust and bestower of beauty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poseidon</td>
<td>god of horses, earthquakes, and the sea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demeter</td>
<td>goddess of grain and mother goddess par excellence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hestia</td>
<td>goddess of the family hearth</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Oikos can be translated better as “household” and includes the extended meanings of “homestead” and “family enterprise.”
Ancient Mediterraneans did not live in nuclear families, but rather as extended families that included not only children and parents, but also frequently daughters-in-law, grandchildren, slaves (in their dual role as property and people), and animals. The property had a boundary and a structure—the house itself, which provided shelter.

Ancient Greek houses were typically built around a central open courtyard. In a typical house, a statue of Hermes is found in the road prior to encountering the entrance. To the side of the entrance is a shrine for Apollo Aguieus (“Apollo on the Street”). Upon entry through the narrow hallway, just beyond the front door, is a shrine for Hermes Strophaios (“Twisting Hermes,” or Hermes of the door hinge). There is a room as well for a human doorman, so gods and humans cooperate here to protect the entrance.

Through the front hallway is a peristyle courtyard,† in the center of which is an altar to Zeus Herkeios (Zeus of the “Enclosure,” suitably enclosed in the interior space of the house), who protected the area occupied by the property. Note that this front part of the house is reserved for men. This is the courtyard of the andron, or men; women had their own courtyard in the back of the house, where they would stay and engage in domestic work.

† A courtyard surrounded by columns and open to the sky.
Through the courtyard, past the altar of Zeus Herkeios, is a hallway with another two shrines. At the end of the hall is an altar of Zeus Ktesios (who safeguarded the family storehouse) as well as the gods of acquired goods. At the end of the hallway is an altar of the paternal gods—that is, the gods one inherits from one’s father, the family’s ancestral gods.

The room in the center of the house, the andron proper, is where men gathered for dining, drinking, and talking. In this room is another altar, to Hestia, goddess of the family hearth. Through this room, toward the back, is the second courtyard, the courtyard of the women, or gynaikeion, where there is the kitchen and another shrine. In the back corner of the courtyard is the master bedroom and a shrine to the gods of marriage, thus rendering the marriage bed the site of sacred activity.

Each family had its own religious traditions, which descended along the male line.

**SERVING THE GODS OF THE HOUSE**

The father of the house served as chief priest. He would have inherited the family gods from his father, and he would determine offerings for Zeus Ktesios as well as for the other gods, especially Hestia, goddess of the hearth, whose altar stood at the center of the house and domestic worship.

Standard forms of worship included food offerings placed on Hestia’s altar, where they were burned; libations or drink offerings, which consisted of pouring out wine; and greetings and prayers. These gods lived in the house and were members of the family as much as the animals, slaves, children, and relatives.

The father also had religious duties outside the home. He was obligated to maintain the family cemetery and to bring regular offerings to departed family members. He also had duties to his clan, or extended family outside the house, as well as to the city.

† Also known in reference to the houses of earlier periods, especially the Bronze Age, as the megaron, or “big room.”

§ Symposion in Greek, or in the more familiar Latinization, symposium.
The wife and mother of the household had no official duties inside the house that belonged strictly to her, so far as we are informed. Naturally, she would have participated in rites led by the patriarch. Images on gravestones as well as other monuments depict women and other family members as participating in sacrifices. Sacrifices took place outdoors, so we know that women participated in such ceremonies outside the house, just as they would have participated in ceremonies inside the house.

The religion women found inside their husbands’ homes, however, was not the worship that they had grown up with. Each household had its own ancestral gods, passed down patrilineally from father to son. Daughters worshipped at their fathers’ hearths until the day they were married. After that, a wife worshipped at her husband’s hearth.

New husbands were generally in their thirties; new wives were typically in their mid-teens. Such marriages would be illegal today, but such age disparities were the norm in the ancient Mediterranean, and this also had implications for the religious experience of women.

The husband was a middle-aged man who continued with his ancestral religion in his original home. The woman, still in her adolescence, must leave her family and her family’s gods and become the member of a new family. She does this when she is still young and impressionable. She arrives young, inexperienced, alone, and a stranger in an established extended family. Given the age disparity, the bride arrives almost more as a daughter than as a partner, and, in fact, marriage placed the bride in a legally dependent role vis-à-vis her husband.

One supposes that the bride’s youth might at least have allowed her time, eventually, to recover, adjust, and become a member of the new family. There was no choice, after all. Marriage was arranged and obligatory, and the state was inclined to punish men who failed to fulfill their obligation to marry by their mid-thirties, and girls simply had to obey their fathers.
The purpose of marriage was the production of legitimate children—that is, children born to legally married citizens, children whose paternity was certified. Family worship depended on blood descent through the father’s line, and many religious and moral conceptions as well as legal requirements restricted female behavior to enforce this requirement.

Marriage was religious and personal, not civil. It varied in Greece from city to city as well as over time, but generally, sacrifices were made to the gods of marriage, such as Artemis and Hera, and the marriage was consummated in the master bedroom before an altar to the gods of marriage. If the bride failed to produce heirs, this was reason enough for divorce.

Women also played an important role in civic and state ceremonies. In a world where many women were confined to the house, such ceremonies represented an opportunity to leave the home and participate in outside activities.

Modern society spends far more resources suppressing fertility, with benefits to the status of women as free and independent agents with control over their own bodies and thus destinies.

Religious Responsibilities of Family Members

Daughters were born, named, welcomed, and loved but were merely temporary lodgers in their fathers’ religion. A daughter eventually left to join another family. She participated in family religious ceremonies but did not enjoy a substantial role. On the other hand, there were community ceremonies in which she could participate along with her mother. Girls had roles, too—just not the same roles as sons.

Most children died before the age of five, so to maintain a stable population, women had to bear many children, risking death from childbirth.
Sons were born into a family and remained religiously tied to that family. Unlike a daughter, a son was entered into the local registry of the *phratry* (his father’s “brotherhood,” or clan), and the father attested to his son’s legitimacy. At puberty (somewhere between 12 and 20), the boy was again presented to the *phratry*, and the father again vouched for the son’s paternity.

The son then began two years of public service called *ephebeia*, after which he could be registered in his father’s *deme*, or municipality, as well as in the city registry. From this point, the young man could participate in political assemblies as well as hold office, and he was obligated to perform military service.

A man’s youth came to an end really only at age 30, after which he was supposed to marry, but even marriage would not release him from his family. The son remained a son, and he could not become head of the household until his father died or voluntarily relinquished his paternal authority. The son, moreover, was obligated to care for his parents in their old age, and he inherited the obligation to maintain family religious traditions as well as the ancestral cemetery.

Slaves participated in family rites to the extent permitted by the father, who was head of the family religion. As slaves, they remained property, though they lived and worked side by side with other family members. Slaves lived in intimate proximity with the family and were legally part of the family household. As such, they ate, slept, worked, and worshipped under the direction of the father. How degrading and inhumane the experience an individual slave thus derived not just from the institution itself, but also the personalities of the father, or householder.

In antiquity, people celebrated tradition as the one true key to religion, morality, and earthly success.
Although the father was the head of his household, he was not master of his fate. He, like everyone else, was born into a system not of his own making. Ancient Greece was famously more permissive in terms of male sexual desire than almost any other society prior to our own. For example, pederasty and homosexuality were not only tolerated but were sometimes celebrated. Such celebrations did not relieve men, however, of the obligation to marry and produce legitimate heirs who would inherit the family religion and tend to the family cemetery.

Traditional religion provided paradigms, and even the father—the head of household, chief priest of his family rites—was hardly free. He was obligated to care for both his ancestral gods and his ancestors, who were not entirely gone. Proper interment was an absolute necessity to ensure safe passage of spirits of the deceased to their resting place. Lacking proper funeral rites, a soul became a malevolent ghost who could cause harm to the living. Ancestral spirits demanded their share of sustenance, too, in the shape of sacrifices, food offerings, and libations—which could be offered only by a living male family member of their own blood. Similarly, the ancestral gods could be worshipped properly only by a male family member related to his ancestors by blood.

Without the blood tie, the ceremonies were invalidated. If an adulterous wife introduced a bastard son into the family line, the religious ceremonies and care for ancestral spirits were polluted—rendered null and void. Hence the repeated public attestations of the son’s paternity at birth and again at puberty. Hence the jealous guardianship exercised by fathers and husbands over female sexuality. Fundamental aspects of family religion absolutely depended on the chastity of the daughter, who becomes wife and mother.

Sons—that is, certifiably legitimate sons—inherited the family property. And families did not want their property leaving the male line through female adultery. Promiscuous male sexuality, so long as it did not interfere with the production of legitimate children in other men’s marriages, was neither a moral nor a religious concern.
On the other hand, female sexuality—at least the sexuality of upper-class free women from citizen families with substantial property—was both a moral and a religious concern.

Slaves and foreigners lived by different rules, which varied by status. They were certainly open game for predatory men.

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

1. Most scholars do not think that the Zeus of Olympus could also serve as a lowly god of the household. What arguments can you muster in support of this prevailing consensus?

2. Gods were present in abundance in the household as well as in public and in nature. What impact might such numerous divine presences have had on personal conduct?
FEEDING THE GODS: SACRIFICIAL RELIGION
The great immortals as well as hosts of lesser deities demand regular feeding. The gods derive benefits from human service, and benefits accrue to human beings as a result of their service to the gods. Animal sacrifice was a central component of ancient pre-Christian religions. It was also a spectacular component that involved multiple participants. Animal sacrifice was practiced across the Mediterranean, including among Jews before the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, as well as in the Near East and ancient India and even farther afield.

**ELEMENTS OF SACRIFICE**

- A sacrifice entails a shared meal between human beings and gods and among human beings. Sacrifice is communal and brings human beings together with gods at the same table to share a meal—to break bread, as it were, if the gods were vegetarian, or to feed on flesh.

- A sacrifice involves certain crucial elements. A prayer identifies the specific deity for whom a sacrifice is intended. The prayer makes a request, and an animal is killed. The god receives a share, which is burned completely. Human beings eat the rest of the animal, adding libations and drink offerings as well as hymns of praise. It is also worth noting that the animal’s permission was required.

- A sacrifice must be something that at some point was alive, either vegetable or animal, because a sacrifice must be something that is potentially capable of bringing gods and human beings together for a meal. The meaning of sacrifice is intimately tied up in the concept of communion, a coming together of divine and human realms. 

_Sacrifice is a process that binds humans to gods, gods to humans, and humans to one another. Sacrifice unites, organizes into hierarchies, and creates the universe and all that is in it. Sacrifice bestows wealth and all good things._
Sacrifices can be classified according to their function:

- **Honorific sacrifices**, the most common type, are performed to please and honor the gods. They bring gods and humans together for communion and a meal.

- **Piacular sacrifices** do not involve shared meals—the god gets everything—and are performed to expiate sins or crimes. Human sacrifices (in the Greco-Roman context) usually fall under this category. Animals certainly could be and were regularly enough burned in their entirety as well.

- **Sacramental sacrifices**, the rarest type, involve a mystical union with the god in addition to a meal and communion. The god is conceived of as being present in, rather than at, the meal. Those present thus “eat the god.” Worship of Dionysus or Bacchus* may serve as an example.

The lines between these types of sacrifices are naturally blurred. The important thing to keep in mind is that a sacrifice involves offering a meal to the gods. This key concept is underscored by 5th century BCE Athenian vase paintings that depict gods hovering over cooking fires. The gods were physically present.

A sacrifice, moreover, meant a great feast. Meat eating was not as common in antiquity as it is today. Even more rarely were animals killed and given over entirely to the gods. Most of the time, human beings ate most of the sacrifice, and the gods contented themselves with the smell of burning guts, which no human being really wanted to eat.

* When maenads tore apart and ate wild animals, they conceived of themselves as eating Bacchus himself in order to become one with him and in him.
We thus discover that rather than being the unnecessary killing of animals, sacrifice provided a regulated system in which human beings were granted access to meat in a context that acknowledged the sacred status of animals. They belonged to the gods and were not to be killed lightly.

Another important element of sacrifice was the opportunity for conversation with the gods. Gods communicated not through human speech but through signs. The process of reading communiqués from the gods during sacrifice is called divination. Gods could express themselves through the sacrificial victim. Hence, when the animal was sliced open, special priests would examine the entrails, especially the liver, and determine what the gods were thinking.

In addition to these interior signs legible only to expert priests, exterior signs visible to all could occur, too. The animals were expected to approach the altar willingly. An unwilling animal meant that the god was not happy. The appearance of anything odd, such as a snake, during the ritual was ominous as well.
One could not simply sacrifice any animal to any god. Male gods received male animals; female gods received female animals. Sky gods received light-colored animals; gods of the earth and underworld received dark ones. Basically, sacrifice followed a like-for-like principle. The gods, who are perfect and immortal, thus accepted only healthy animals.

**SACRIFICE IN THE RIGVEDA**

Ancient Indian sacrifice in the *Rigveda* shows interesting parallels but also offers some reflective divergence that may shed light on what sacrifice meant in the Indo-European world.

Aside from the role of the priest in speaking sacred words, the *Rigveda* does not speak vigorously about the spectacular moment of sacrifice. But what the *Rigveda* does tell us is that, like Greco-Roman sacrifice, great emphasis was placed on the correct performance of ritual. The ritual had to be correct or the whole ceremony had to be repeated. To assure accuracy, four priests shared duties:

- The *hotar*, or “sacrifice,” invoked the gods in prayer or hymn.
- The *udgatar*, or “chorister,” provided chants in conjunction with the *hotar*.
- The *adhvaryu* served as officiating priest. He performed ritual duties that involved material—for example, kindling fire. He did not, however, slaughter animals. (A special *samitar* performed this task.)
- The *brahmin* served as superintending priest and checked for mistakes.

This overview suffices to show that sacrifice was very much rooted in practice as well as theory.

In the *Rigveda*, human beings are essential to maintaining the system that the gods established.
A hymn in the *Rigveda* entitled “The Origins of Sacred Speech” outlines the importance of speech to ritual performance. Speech, who is personified, is central. One finds sacred speech in the sages, or priests. Knowledge of how to perform sacrifice properly will manifest itself as an exclusively priestly monopoly:

Through the sacrifice they traced the path of speech and found it inside the sages.

This hymn indicates the importance of speech by comparing its—or her—personified and seductive power to a wife who reveals her body to her husband. Note that patriarchy was not exclusive to the Mediterranean.

On the other hand, although priests have a monopoly on this power, not all priests are equal. Some have more knowledge than others. According to verse 8:

When the intuitions of the mind are shaped in the heart, when Brahmins perform sacrifices together as friends, some are left behind for lack of knowledge, while others surpass them with the power to praise.

Another hymn allows Speech to speak in “her own voice.” Speech tells us that she is the most powerful force in the universe. She organizes gods:

I move with the Rudras, with the Vasus, with the Adityas and all the gods. I carry both Mitra and Varuna, both Indra and Agni, and both of the Asvins.

In fact, by the end of the hymn, Speech claims to be coextensive with the entire universe:

I gave birth to the father on the head of this world. My womb is in the waters, within the ocean. From there I spread out over all creatures and touch the very sky with the crown of my head. I am the one who blows like the wind, embracing all creatures. Beyond the sky, beyond this earth, so much have I become in my greatness!
The word is the world! We create our world through the words we use to describe it, shape it, codify it, and organize the patterns of our lives through religious rituals. To perform a Vedic sacrifice, one needed to have the right words.

A hymn entitled “Royal Consecration” offers a concrete example of what speech and sacrifice can accomplish together. Speech in a ritual and ceremonial context transforms a man into a king and establishes him firmly on his throne:

Firm is the sky and firm the earth, and firm are these mountains. Firm is all this world, and firm is this king of all our people.

Sometimes the gods listen; sometimes they do not. In a hymn entitled “Lament of the Aged Priest,” whose patron and source of income has died, we encounter a strikingly honest crisis of confidence:

My ribs encircle me with pain like rival wives; poverty, nakedness, weakness bind me. My mind flutters here and there like a bird. As rats gnaw their tails, cares gnaw at me.

The priest is in pain. This leads to a crisis of confidence, and he goes on to confess:

If I had power over the immortals or over mortals, my generous patron would be alive.

The priest appears to despair over the efficacy of sacrifice.

We may contrast this old, unemployed priest to the working priests of a hymn entitled “The Sacrificial Priests.” Their song exhibits confidence in their knowledge of sacred lore and in the power of their activities to secure blessings.

† This hymn was also used as a spell to stop earthquakes.
The Rigveda helps us reconstruct a worldview in which sacrifice is central. The Old Testament, or Hebrew Bible, also prominently features sacrifice. Here is just one example from among many in the first chapter of Leviticus, verses 10–13:

If the offering is a burnt offering from the flock, from either the sheep or the goats, you are to offer a male without defect. You are to slaughter it at the north side of the altar before the LORD, and Aaron’s sons the priests shall splash its blood against the sides of the altar. You are to cut it into pieces, and the priest shall arrange them, including the head and the fat, on the wood that is burning on the altar. You are to wash the internal organs and the legs with water, and the priest is to bring all of them and burn them on the altar. It is a burnt offering, a food offering, an aroma pleasing to the Lord.

As among other Mediterranean peoples, the victim must be perfect. Other permissible sacrifices include foodstuff from plants. And the god enjoys the meal by means of aerial transmission.

HUMAN SACRIFICE

Human sacrifice appears in myth, legend, sacred texts, and history. Agamemnon, the greatest of the Greeks, sacrificed his daughter to appease Artemis. Baal, a god of ancient Semitic peoples, demanded the firstborn. In the Hebrew Bible, Abraham almost sacrifices Isaac, and the prophets rail against the practice. The Romans confessed to sacrificing Gauls and Greeks on two separate occasions. ‡

What compels human beings to feed the gods?

According to Homer and the Hebrew Bible, the gods enjoy a good meal.

‡ The Romans also accused Carthaginians and Celts of practicing human sacrifice while averting their eyes from their own bloody gladiatorial games.
Some of the most spectacular examples come from the Aztecs, who, like their European and Near Eastern counterparts, also sacrificed children, mainly to help crops grow.

More famous and dramatic were the sacrifices of captured warriors, sometimes in the thousands, atop the Great Temple in the center of Tenochtitlán (modern-day Mexico City). The victims were painted red with white vertical stripes. Each carried a flag and was led up the steep pyramid steps. At the top, the victim was flung over the altar.

Four priests each held one of the victim’s limbs. A fifth pressed down on his throat. A sixth struck a powerful blow on the victim’s upper chest, breaking the sternum. He then reached into the chest cavity, ripped out the heart, held it up to the sky, and threw it into a nearby jar.

The corpse was then tossed down the steps of the temple, where it would be collected by the warrior who took the victim into captivity. The body was decapitated and delimbed. The torso was disposed of, and the victim’s thighs were distributed for a ceremonial meal.

In his Florentine Codex, the 16th-century Spanish friar Bernardino de Sahagún describes one such ceremony:

[The victim] was cut up; one of his thighs was sent for Moctezuma’s meal, and the rest was divided between the people of rank or relatives. They normally went to the house of whoever had brought the dead man into captivity. This flesh was cooked with maize.
The head would eventually be placed on a skull rack. Skulls were also decorated with knives emerging from mouth and nose.

Aztec sacrifice shares many elements with both Greco-Roman and ancient Indian sacrifice: The gods receive a portion of the sacrificial victim (i.e., the heart) while humans gather to share fellowship and a meal.

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

1. Do you think that meat-eating that takes the life of a living creature in the context of a religious ceremony is as civilized as, more civilized than, or less civilized than our own combination of industrialized meat-eating and non-sacrificial religion? Why?

2. Human sacrifice with cannibalism is the form of sacrifice that is likely least simple to comprehend from outside its own religious system. Is it worth the intellectual effort to view such a practice from the inside? Can we imagine what a world might look like if we accepted such rules?
PRAYERS, VOWS, DIVINATION, AND OMENS
Because the gods existed in multitudes everywhere at all times, the opportunity for messages, communication, and—through sacrifice—communion was also always open. One needed to stay alert and look for the signs, from birds in the sky to the organs of animals sacrificed at the altars to one's dreams at night. And if one was unsure of the message, experts were available, at a price, although not all soothsayers were equally competent. Religious science, perhaps like modern medicine, was not an exact science.

**PRAYERS AND VOWS**

- Among the ancient Etruscans, who lived in what is now Tuscany in Italy north of Rome, there was a whole science of extispicy—that is, the reading of the entrails of sacrificed animals, especially of livers. When the Romans became interested in this science, they hired Etruscan haruspices, as they were called, for their specialized knowledge. The Greeks did not develop the science of livers to the same extent, but they did test the entrails, and such parallels demonstrate a common perception that the interior of the sacrificial victim could reveal aspects of divine will. The liver and other entrails were examined closely as well as tasted.

- The way in which the parts that were offered to the gods burned on the altars revealed omens, too. Did the altars burn brightly, or did the flame sputter full of smoke? Signs were everywhere. Even without words, the gods could talk to those with eyes to see, tongues to taste, noses to smell, and ears to hear. And if all was well, the honored god participated in the feast with those who made the offering.
The communication was not one way, of course. Prayer accompanied sacrifices, and in prayer, we are able to listen to human words. Prayers accompanied not just sacrifices; they also functioned more generally in other religious contexts and followed similar basic patterns.

The pattern for a prayer, or petition, is as follows: One identifies precisely the god to whom one submits the petition. One specifies what one has done or will do for the god. One makes a request. The god then chooses whether or not he or she will fulfill the request that has been properly submitted for divine consideration.

When a human being promises to do something for the god, provided that request is subsequently fulfilled, we generally call the request a vow rather than a prayer. Vows have two parts: a promise; and, if the request is granted, the fulfillment of the vow,* which is the votive offering.

We have many examples of inscriptions on stone that commemorate the fulfillment of specific vows. We also have other, more representational symbols of fulfilled vows. These were found especially at healing sanctuaries, where terra-cotta body parts were offered in thanks for the god’s assistance with specific ailments.

The structure of vows and prayers is similar to a commercial contract. There is an established record of payment, or the offer of a specific payment, in exchange for which the human beings asks for a specific service. Just as one must make a contract with a legitimate owner to purchase property, one must identify the specific god to whom one makes payment and from whom one asks for a benefit. The god can agree or refuse. Speculative payments in advance do not guarantee successful prayers. On the other hand, vows do not run this risk. By vowing a specific payment upon conferral of a specific benefit, one can contain costs by promising only what one can afford.

* The English word “vow,” which derives from the Latin word voveo, retains the sense of making a promise but has lost the second part of the word’s meaning: to fulfill that promise. Both “vow” and “fulfillment” are in Latin a votum.
Penalties existed for those who refused to pay, and the gods were their own debt collectors. The gods, according to what ancient authors tell us, did not forget what was owed and punished those who neglected them. Agamemnon famously had to sacrifice his own daughter to appease Artemis, whom he had stiffed for a promised sacrifice.

The fees were also on a sliding scale, and payments could be made in other ways besides the foodstuff that were required in sacrifice. In cities, the rich could afford better offerings, and they worked to secure divine favor through more spectacular offerings. More humble citizens offered what they could afford, and inscriptions on stone still testify to some of what they paid.

As an inventory from the Temple of Asklepios in Athens from the 4th century BCE tells us:

- Xenokrates dedicated a gold ring in a case.
- Dion dedicated a silver crown.
- Demonstrate dedicated a bronze wine jar.
- Nikias a marble conch-shell.

Other dedications include varying small amounts of money, a key, rings, seals, jugs, shoes, a flute, a pillow, etc.

This sort of communication is straightforward. One can pray or make a vow for recovery from an ailment, the health and safety of a city, crops, family members, a safe journey, or victory in war. Such prayers will be answered—or perhaps not. Those who enter into commerce with the gods will be expected to pay.
DIVINATION AND OMENS

One may also consult the gods for advice. The entrails and livers of sacrificial victims could convey messages from the gods. One could also look for messages in nature, especially from birds. The science of bird-watching was especially well developed by the Romans, and it was incorporated into the constitutional fabric of the state. The Greeks also paid attention to birds.

For example, the general Xenophon, who later wrote his memoirs as well as history more generally, informs us that when considering whether to accept high command, he consulted the gods and received an omen that was seemingly favorable:

An eagle screamed on his right; however [as Xenophon goes on to explain] the eagle was sitting down, which the soothsayer, who was escorting him, said was a bird for the great rather than for the ordinary person, and its appearance symbolized glory, but also hard work, for other birds attack the eagle when it is sitting. The bird also did not prophesy profit, for the eagle captures food while flying [but this one was sitting].

The gods communicate via means that are readily available in nature—here an eagle—but some expert knowledge is required for correct interpretation. Armies took religious experts along. Soothsayers, haruspices, and priests were essential personnel.

Such experts were available in civilian life, too. In his tragedy *Antigone*, Sophocles represents the procedure of consulting the gods through bird-watching when he has the prophet Teiresias say:

You will understand, when you hear the signs revealed by my art. As I took my place on my old seat of augury where all birds regularly gather for me, I heard an unintelligible voice among them: they were screaming in dire frenzy that made their language foreign to me. I realized that they were ripping each other with their talons, murderously—the rush of their wings did not lack meaning.
The seer did some bird-watching with a question in mind, and the behavior of the birds that appeared provided the answer.

Birds can also appear unbidden, of course, and such spontaneous omens can convey warnings, as in the 12th book of the *Iliad* when the appearance of an eagle helps halt the Trojan attack:

For all their numbers and valor, and their eagerness
To break through the wall and fight by the ships,
Hesitated on the brink of the trench,
Paralyzed by an omen, an eagle overhead
That skirted their front lines from right to left,
Clutching in its talons a huge scarlet snake,
Still alive and with plenty of fight left.
Curling around, the snake struck at the eagle
Just below its neck, and, in a spasm of pain,
The great bird dropped it in the Trojan ranks
And flew off shrieking on a blast of wind.
The soldiers shuddered at the glistening coils
Lying in their midst, a portent from heaven.

Then again, the same bird’s spontaneous appearance can also provide encouragement. In the 13th book of the *Iliad*, when Ajax shouts abuse at the Trojan hero Hector, Homer tells us:

[Ajax’s] words were not out before a bird flew past
On the right, a high-soaring eagle.
The Achaeans shouted, taking heart
At the omen.

This process of reading bird signs is just one method of divination—or predicting the will of the gods by reading the signs they provide—but it is one of the most common and freely available.
Another common means of divination was the simple sneeze. In the *Odyssey*, Penelope outlines what vengeance her missing husband Odysseus would wreak on the suitors (that is, the young men who are eating her out of house and home) if only he were home. Unbeknownst to her, he is home. To quote Homer:

Just as she finished, Telemachus sneezed
A loud sneeze that rang through the halls.
Penelope laughed and said to Eumaeus [her trusted swineherd]:

“Go ahead and call the stranger for me!
Didn’t you see my son sneeze at my words?
That means death will surely come to the suitors,
One and all. Not a single man will escape.”

This omen is woven into the fabric of daily domestic life. In a world where divine forces are everywhere, anything can take on predictive meaning, provided one is alert to the clues.

Dreams offer nightly portals to other worlds, and we have many recorded instances of nocturnal visions from literature, history, and inscriptions. Dreams permitted not only gods to visit but also the dead, who could provide warnings and advice. The gods also often sent false dreams, and there was a mythology around how and why they did this.

Odysseus’s wife Penelope, for example, has dreamt of an eagle that killed her 20 geese. Odysseus, who has entered his house disguised as a beggar, tells his wife Penelope:

Odysseus himself has shown you
How he will finish this business.
The suitors’ doom
Is clear. Not one will escape death’s black birds.
Penelope, however, is hesitant and explains the difficulties in trying to interpret dreams:

Stranger, you should know that dreams
Are hard to interpret, and don’t always come true.
There are two gates for dreams to drift through,
One made of horn and the other of ivory.
Dreams that pass through the gate of ivory
Are deceptive dreams and will not come true,
But when someone has a dream that has passed
Through the gate of polished horn, that dream
Will come true. My strange dream, though,
Did not come from there. If it had,
It would have been welcome to me and my child.

This mythology, which we find at the beginning of Greek literature, would later be adopted by the Romans, whose Homeric counterpart Vergil provides more precise details. At the end of the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, we learn that dreams sent before midnight pass through a deceptive gate of ivory, but dreams sent after midnight pass through the truer gate of horn.

We also have numerous instances of dreams playing significant roles in historical events, at least as they are recorded by ancient historians. Herodotus, for example, who wrote the history of the wars between the Greeks and the Persians, records numerous dreams. In one example, the Greek tyrant Polycrates intends to visit Oroetes, governor of Sardis, despite the strong dissuasion of his diviners and friends, and a vision seen by his daughter in a dream: she dreamt that she saw her father aloft in the air, washed by Zeus and anointed by the sun; after this vision she used all means to persuade him not to go on this journey.
Polycrates nevertheless goes to Oroetes and is executed by him, presumably crucified. Crucifixion takes place outdoors. Polycrates was thus exposed to the elements and was indeed “washed by Zeus when it rained, and the sun then anointed him when his body released its moisture.”

Many centuries later, Romans were still interested in divinatory dreams, although dreams played no role in the state religion. Julius Caesar, for example, allegedly dreamt that he had intercourse with his mother. This was a happy dream, according to the experts, because it meant that he would possess the whole earth, which is the mother of us all.

Dreams were, in fact, a big business, especially in ancient Greece. One could seek them out in healing sanctuaries of Asklepios, for example, and inscriptions survive that inform us of the dreams that were dreamt, the gods who visited, and more.

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

1. How might a worldview in which multiple deities can communicate through nature, our dreams, and the internal organs of the animals that we slaughter in sacrifice for communal meals orient our attention to our surroundings as we go about our daily business?

2. Let us suppose that we face a dilemma and must make an important decision. We encounter a flock of birds behaving strangely and take this as an omen. The omen obviously does not deliver its divine message in human language; it requires interpretation. We seek wise counselors and relate the dilemma and the omen. How might discussion and debate about the meaning of the omen lead us to a solution of our dilemma?
DELPHI AND OTHER GREEK SANCTUARIES
Sanctuaries were integral to ancient religious life. They were places where people gathered to worship and receive benefits from the gods. There were many sanctuaries across ancient Greece, but Delphi, the site of the famous oracle of Apollo, was the most famous.

**DELPHI: SITE OF THE FAMOUS ORACLE OF APOLLO**

- Delphi is remote today and was even more remote in antiquity when travel was difficult. Nevertheless, it was also rather centrally located and thus equally inconvenient for all regions of Greece and well-situated to serve as a meeting point.

- People—individuals, representatives of cities and states, and potentates—came in droves from all directions. Delphi was an oracle that attracted the rich and powerful, and many of the ruins still visible on the site today are the remains of treasuries and dedications from those who commemorated their gratitude for divine assistance.

- Delphi was sacred to Apollo, who allegedly earned the rights to his sanctuary by killing an immense serpent called Pytho. The priestesses who served there were called Pythia* in remembrance of this dragon, and they allegedly inhaled fumes to intoxicate themselves before delivering divine messages.

* Originally, there was a single Pythia, but the number was increased to two, with a third in reserve in case something happened to one of the two active priestesses. The Pythia had to be an unmarried woman of Delphi who devoted her life to service of the god.
Delphi was, of course, not the only divinatory sanctuary. There were many throughout the Greek world, not just of Apollo or of Zeus, but of various gods as well as of heroes and the dead more generally. The ancient Greeks were obsessed with trying to gain insight into the future, and they possessed many means. But consultation of oracles did not guarantee success.

Of all the oracles, the Delphic oracle was the most famous. It was also Panhellenic—that is, open to all Greeks from all city-states. When the Greeks were not fighting outsiders, their petty city-states and small alliances were frequently at war among themselves. The Greeks did not achieve any real unity until Macedonian kings in the persons of Philip and Alexander the Great conquered them in the 4th century BCE and, although Macedonians, made themselves the champions of Greek culture. This Greek unity came at the cost of independence.

But before this unity imposed from above, there were other markers that unified the Greeks, despite their many differences. They had the Greek language, of course, but also their love of political independence and the general shape of their religion. They also shared in such common Panhellenic shrines as the Delphic oracle that brought them together not just as visitors to the shrine, but also for the games that were celebrated there.
Far more famous today are the Olympic Games, which were celebrated at the Panhellenic shrine of Zeus at Olympia. But Delphi also had its games, the Pythian Games, named after the python killed by Apollo. These Pythian games, which were celebrated every four years, included athletics, of course, but also a huge music festival. And the constant stream of visitors in search of answers kept the Delphians busy even during years between games.

Prominently featured toward the center of the complex at Delphi was the temple of Apollo as well as a smaller building next to it for the Pythian priestesses. There was also a theater, which underscores the importance of the cultural component to ancient Pythian Games.

All around the main structure were smaller buildings. Many of these structures bear the names of city-states: Thebes, Syracuse, Potidaea, Corinth, and Athens. Some 27 so-called treasuries surrounded the great temple. These treasuries had been built by grateful city-states as well as by other rulers both Greek and foreign, and they testified to the gratitude of their dedicators for the oracles that they had received there. Other dedications were made, too. King Croesus of Lydia in Asia Minor (located in what is today Turkey) sent a huge silver mixing bowl that could hold the contents, Herodotus tells us, of 600 large amphorae.‡

† Music at Delphi was fitting for the god Apollo, who is so often depicted with a lyre.
‡ Using the later standard of 39 liters per amphora results in an 1,800-liter capacity, or about 475 gallons.
The religious personnel at Delphi were particularly well-informed about geography, which they may well have learned from the international crowd that flocked there, and the oracles often gave precise geographical hints. More importantly perhaps for understanding their significance, oracles often granted a sort of divine title to other people’s land. A divine title can be helpful in colonization efforts, which frequently involve taking land from other people. Divine titles, backed up by military force, have proven useful.

Oracles required intelligent interpretation and careful application. How, then, did one go about asking, and in what form did the inquirer receive answers? Originally, according to ancient sources, consultation was permissible only one day per year in March, the seventh of Bysius, which was Apollo’s birthday. In the historical period, however, the oracle was operated every month, although we do not know precisely how frequently.

We are told that three days before pronouncing an oracular response, a priestess—that is, the Pythia—would prepare by fasting and bathing in the Castalian spring. Ritual bathing would have been required of the inquirers as well.

On the day set for consultation, names were selected by lot to determine the order in which visitors could ask their questions. Whereas we consider a lottery a function of chance, the ancients used a lottery as a means to let the gods decide. The gods determined the order. Chance was also a goddess in her own right, and riches are an indication of good fortune and divine favor. Those who had donated immense treasures, like King Croesus, were granted *promanteia*, or advance consultation, and could skip the line.

The Christian church would later play a similar role in sanctioning the colonization of non-Christian territories.
A formal ceremony would determine whether the day was auspicious and thus permissible for consultation. This could have been determined theoretically from the observation of the flight of birds, but at Delphi, the rule was to conduct a sacrifice with an attendant examination of the victim’s internal organs. Victims included boars, goats, and oxen, and they had to be perfect and healthy. Animals generally were required to nod consent when led to the altar. At Delphi, the animal also had to tremble for the omens to be good.

Assuming the omens were good, the Pythia would burn laurel leaves, barley flour, and incense on the altar; mount the tripod that stood above a chasm; and breathe in the vapors. Ancient vase paintings depict the scene, and the theme has been a favorite of artists since the Renaissance as well.

The priestess would sometimes convulse, make noises, or cry out. A prophet or priest stood next to her, and it was his job to interpret the noises that she made and write out the prophecy in intelligible language, which he did in dactylic hexameter, the same verse form in which Homer and other poets composed their epics.

Weird as this system may appear to us at first glance, it was taken seriously for centuries and played a powerful role in personal, governmental, and international affairs. This oracle, as recorded by the historian Herodotus, was given to the Athenians when they faced the Persian invasion:

Pallas strives in vain to appease great Zeus of Olympus
Words of entreaty are useless, as are cunning counsels of wisdom.
Nonetheless advice will I give you again, of strength adamantine.
All shall be taken and lost that the sacred border of Cecrops
Holds in keeping to-day, and the dales divine of Cithaeron
Yet shall a wood-built wall by Zeus all-seeing be granted
Unto the Triton-born, a stronghold for you and your children.
The oracle was alarming. Athena, patron goddess of Athens, cannot allay her father Zeus’s anger. The Athenians are told that they should abandon their city, as everything would be captured. The Athenians are encouraged, however, by the “wood-built wall” that Zeus grants to the Triton-born—that is, to his daughter Athena—that will serve as their stronghold.

The gods offer guidance, but it is left to human intelligence to use the information wisely. Human effort is always required.

OTHER MAJOR SANCTUARIES

Delphi was Panhellenic. Its hero cult, on the other hand, was decidedly local. Just as families and clans cared for their dead, cities cared for their heroes. Heroes were spiritual beings who had lived extraordinary lives as men and who, as a result, still retained some powers after their earthly demise. In some respects, their cult was similar to the services paid by families to their deceased relatives. In other respects, hero cults were closer to the forms of worship that were offered to gods.

The extreme case of Herakles demonstrates an instance where the hero was actually raised to a life among the Olympians themselves, but his case was atypical. A more typical hero was one who resided as an earth god or, to use Greek and Latin, a chthonic deity—that is, a divine spirit who was tied to a particular piece of ground and thus a protector of the locality or city.

Though hero cults for women were far less numerous than cults for male heroes, there is evidence for female hero cults, and not just women associated with particular male heroes.

Female goddesses also received their fair share of sanctuaries. Hera, Artemis, Aphrodite, cults of nymphs, and Athena received temples, sanctuaries, honors, and elaborate honors that we call cult.
Hero cults could also be used for political purposes. The democratic reformer Kleisthenes wanted to prevent geographical dominance by any particular region of Athens—coastal, city, or inland countryside—so, in order to form groups that were not based on clan membership, Kleisthenes obtained from the oracle at Delphi the names of 10 heroes. The citizenry was then organized into 10 tribes named after these 10 eponymous heroes. Their bronze statues once featured prominently in the Agora, or central market of Athens. Even today, we can still see the base of their statues.

The monument of the 10 eponymous heroes also served as a place for people to gather news about tribal matters, as notices would be posted at the relevant statue. We can compare the information one gathers at social functions associated with religious life or the business deals that can begin over coffee after a service. In the ancient world, religion was interwoven with all aspects of life, from the home to the central marketplace to city government to international affairs.

Health, too, was a religious concern, and one of the largest sanctuaries of ancient Greece was dedicated to Asklepios, the god of healing, at Epidaurus. The divine career of Asklepios, like that of Herakles, is in its origin an example of a hero cult that has burst the bounds of the standard hero cult. Sanctuaries to Asklepios—or, later, to Aesculapius, as he was known in Latin—were established in many places, but let us survey the complex of Epidaurus.

Eponymous is the Greek word for “named after.”

** The American School of Classical Studies in Athens, which leads excavations in the Athenian Agora, offers in the Agora Museum models that reconstruct what this central meeting place looked like in different periods in the history of Athens.
From what we know of the partially excavated site, the sanctuary consisted of many parts, including an impressively large theater, lodging for patients and relatives, a gymnasium, a race track, a temple to Artemis, an altar of Apollo, the temple of Asklepios, the abaton (where sufferers, especially of chronic ailments, could hope for a visit from the god), a library, and baths.

In essence, this sanctuary was a combination of a hospital, spa, worship center, and cultural center. The site was quite extensive. The race track included seating for a sizeable crowd, although crowds attending the races at the quadrennial games in honor of Zeus at Olympia were, of course, rather larger.

The sanctuary of Asklepios at Epidaurus represented far more than a sanctuary for a hero or even for a god. It offered a holistic approach to human health and included numerous entertainments for patient and family alike.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Imagine a sacred space that is familiar to you. How does that place put you in a different frame of mind? What is different about the space? What does it exclude? What does it include? How does such a space help one focus?

2. Some sanctuaries in ancient Greece were more like spas or theme parks, with many different kinds of events on offer. What would be the political benefits of bringing Greeks from diverse polities together for religious worship, athletic competitions, and other attractions?
The ceremonies of civic cults, such as the worship of Athena in Athens, took place publicly. Alternatively, mystery religions were cults that required secret initiation away from the prying and profane eyes of the public. Examples include the worship of Demeter at Eleusis (a small town not far from Athens) and of Dionysus, which spread not just in Greece but also to Italy and beyond. The sometimes-vaunted patience or tolerance of the polytheistic state did not always permit, and sometimes even persecuted, such worshippers, especially those who followed Dionysus, the god of intoxication.

ATHENA, GODDESS OF THE CITY OF ATHENS

Athena earned her epithet, Polias, when she became the patron goddess of the polis, or city. This occurred, according to myth, when Erichthonius (also called Erectheus) judged a contest between Athena and Poseidon when the two of them vied for precedence. Athena offered the olive; Poseidon offered salt water. Erichthonius chose the olive and thus Athena, who became Athena Polias, City Athena of Athens.

According to legend, Erichthonius also established the Panathenaic festival—the festival of “All Athens”—a yearly celebration of Athena’s birthday, on the 28th of Hekatombaion, a month that fell somewhere between July and August. This was a hot time of year, which is perhaps why preliminary festivities began the evening beforehand with all-night singing and dance performances by choruses of girls and boys. This was the Pannychis, the “All-nighter.” And dawn was only the midpoint, as the festival proper began with daybreak.
The Panathenaea was celebrated in two varieties: a smaller, or lesser, and a larger, or greater. The lesser version of the Panathenaea was celebrated annually for three years, and every fourth year, a greater Panathenaea subsumed the activities of the lesser Panathenaea by adding days for preliminary contests. Festivities included musical contests, poetry recitations, gymnastic contests, horse and chariot racing, and Pyrrhic dances. On the day following the festival, there was a supplementary boat race.

For the lesser Panathenaea, these contests could be squeezed into a day or two. For the greater Panathenaea, the contests could stretch on for three days or more. All these contests were, like the nocturnal choruses of the Pannychis, preliminary and served to determine who would lead the main event on the 28th of Hekatombaion.

The centerpiece of the festival was a lavish parade—a procession followed by animal sacrifices of cows, bulls, sheep, and rams—with subsequent feasting on sacrificial meat, which was distributed according to deme, or district.

Literary reports from ancient authors tell us that the whole population turned out for the procession, citizens and resident aliens alike. Slaves are not mentioned, however, so perhaps it was just the whole free population. The victors of the various contests led the way, followed by sacrificial officiants, officers of the army, dignitaries who had reached old age, young men, and many girls and women, who escaped the confines of the house for this religious occasion. It was the women’s job to manufacture each year a new peplos, or cloak, for Athena.

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* Pyrrhic dances were a sort of war dance performed by naked men who wore nothing more than a helmet on their heads and a shield on their left arm.

† The parade was depicted on the Parthenon and was found in the remains of the frieze on the exterior wall of the naos—that is, the portion of the temple that enclosed the statue of Athena. One may view the images from the Parthenon friezes in the British Museum.
DEMETER, GODDESS OF GRAIN

The greatest example of exclusively female worship is the Thesmophoria, which was a three-day festival in honor of Demeter, goddess of grain. But this description fails to capture the reverence in which Demeter was held. The ancient historian Diodorus tells us that Demeter’s gift is what makes human life possible at all. Athena protected; Demeter granted life itself.

To prepare for Demeter’s worship, upper-class women—to whom the rites were confined, and perhaps only married women—abstained from sexual relations for nine days and possibly resorted to special herbs to reduce sexual desires, at least according to our male sources. The three-day festival consisted of three days away from home, camping on the ground, and began with a nocturnal procession during which the women sang lewd songs and made obscene comments.

Three days away from the strictures of the women’s quarters at home were probably a welcome respite. The rituals were kept secret, but in addition to the camping, we hear of sacrifices that included throwing pigs into chasms. We would like to know more. Ancient male authors offered guesses, just as they offered guesses about other exclusively female rites, but the secrets of the Thesmophoria remain well kept.

Remarkably, the Eleusinian mysteries of Demeter, which were open to both men and women, also remain hidden. Despite the many thousands who were initiated over the centuries, no clear account has come down to us.

‡ Obscenity was tolerated, if not enjoyed, in certain religious contexts.
Demeter was the mother of Persephone, who was also known as Kora, the maiden. Persephone was captured by Hades to serve as his wife in the underworld, and when Persephone went missing, a distraught Demeter searched for her daughter until she learned her daughter’s fate. After that, Demeter was grief-stricken and angry.

Eventually, Demeter convinced Zeus to compel his brother to return Persephone. Alas, Persephone had eaten some pomegranate seeds while in the underworld, so she was each year compelled to remain as many months below the earth as she had eaten seeds. When Persephone is above the earth with her mother, Demeter is full of joy and blesses the earth with fertility. When the daughter is with Hades below the earth, her mother mourns, and nothing grows. This explains the seasons and provides the backdrop to the mysteries that took place originally only at Demeter’s sanctuary in Eleusis.

Although initiation was open to both citizens and foreigners, one could not simply show up at the beginning of the annual 10-day festival in September. A would-be initiate had to arrive early and make arrangements. Initiates had to find an instructor, or mystagogos, who had already been initiated. The mystagogos would test the votary for fitness and present the applicant to the priest, or hierophant. Preparations included fasting during the daytime and eating only at night, abstaining from certain foods, including pomegranates.

At the beginning of the festival, votaries gathered at sunset and proceeded on foot to the sea, where they would bathe. On the days that followed, there were sacrifices, all-night vigils that were also called pannychis, and eventually a trek on foot to Eleusis, which, if done efficiently, would take about four hours to cover 11 miles but generally took much longer.

Despite the attempts of Christian emperors to shut down Eleusis, the mysteries remained popular until 394 CE, when the sanctuary was destroyed by a barbarian invasion.
When the night for initiation came, before being allowed to enter, the initiate said, according to the Christian author Clement of Alexandria:

I fasted; I drank the potion [consisting of barley, cheese, wine and magical drugs]. I took from the chest. Having done my task, I have placed in the basket, and from the basket into the chest.

The initiate was then, we are told, instructed in what happened to Persephone and learned things from the priest that could not be repeated. In fact, divulging the mysteries of Persephone was punishable by death.

The highest grade of initiation came a year later, when it was possible to see the sacred objects. Whatever the objects may have been, the sun shone brighter for the initiates, and they spoke of a greater peace and understanding about what lay in the next world after their earthly life came to an end. And this makes sense, as Persephone could offer assistance when the deceased entered Hades.

DIONYSUS, GOD OF INTOXICATION

Another mystery religion that attracted the attention not just of Christian moralists but also the state authorities of the pre-Christian world was the worship of Dionysus, the god of wine and intoxication.

§ The tragedian Aeschylus was brought up on charges of having divulged the mysteries in his plays but was acquitted.

¶ Our most famous representation of Dionysus derives from a tragedy of Euripides, *The Bacchae*, produced in 405 BCE.
Dionysus—whom the Romans called Bacchus or Liber—was the son of Zeus. His mother Semele was mortal and had been tricked by Hera (who disguised herself as a friendly old woman) into asking Zeus to make love to her the way he did to Hera. Semele cajoled Zeus to do just that. Alas, Zeus, in all his glory, is a thunderbolt. Semele died in a flash of lightning. But Zeus saved the son in her womb by sewing him up in his thigh until the fetus came to term. Dionysus, because he was born not just from a mortal woman’s womb but was also born again from Zeus’s thigh, was immortal. He was the twice-born god, and he introduced, according to myth, the cultivation of the vine (that is, grapes, viticulture, and the raw materials for wine). Dionysus was also a jealous god and persecuted those who refused to worship him.

Women who worshipped Bacchus were called maenads. They were often depicted carrying a long stick or fennel stalk topped with ivy (the *thyrsus*), and their rites included gathering in an all-female group (only women could be maenads; if a group included both men and women, it was a *thiasos*). They preferred to gather in remote mountain spots for wild dancing (*oreibasia*) but also ripping wild animals to pieces and then eating the flesh of these wild animals raw. They imagined that the god was himself mystically present in the animal. This was the so-called pleasure of eating raw flesh (*omophagis charis*).

Worship of Bacchus was, at least according to myth, perceived as a threat to male control over religious practice. Women removed themselves from the city and participated in emotional rituals removed from the male gaze and male control.
One did more than tell stories about Bacchus in antiquity. He was worshipped with real and sometimes extravagant rites. In many places, his worship also differed from the calmer worship of the gods of Olympus, consisting of the sacrifice of animals by state priests. Athens, however, eventually incorporated worship of Dionysus into its yearly schedule of festivals, thus providing an example of how cities tamed him, so to speak.

Indeed, a state that had numerous gods could always adopt additional gods, and most states tolerated numerous other gods if worshippers stayed out of trouble. But the state did not always tolerate all gods indiscriminately, and mystery cults sometimes came under suspicion, especially those that, like the worship of Dionysus, brought women out of the house at night for wine drinking and wild dancing without male supervision. Looking ahead to Rome, even after Dionysus had been tamed in Greece, Bacchic worship could still upset polytheists elsewhere.

The advantages of joining such a non-state cult, according to the cults themselves, were many, including fertility in this world and assistance in the next. Cult initiates received help from the god of the cult when facing the judges of the underworld. An afterlife, let alone eternal bliss, was not guaranteed by state gods.

Cult gods, on the other hand, like Bacchus—because he had been born once of a mortal woman and then a second time into eternal life as an immortal god—could help an individual fix things in the next world, but only if the individual were a properly initiated member of his cult.
There were also advantages in this world, including wild mountain dancing, raw animal flesh, and wine. In mixed gatherings—in the *thiasos*—this could lead to sex (which is not to say that sex could not have occurred at same-sex gatherings as well) and sometimes violence.**

State cults gave citizens membership in the civic body. Mystery religions gave people membership in a personal cult—that is, a cult that addressed individual and personal needs. Participation in the cult in this world allowed one to transcend normal life. One experienced temporary membership within a community of fellow worshippers, bringing a potentially blissful feeling of belonging. Altogether, it was a rather attractive package.

Why did the state sometimes object? Women who were citizens and had sex outside marriage threatened property relations, which descended patrilineally. And gatherings without proper supervision were tantamount to political conspiracy.

In 186 BCE, the Roman state outlawed the worship of Bacchus for these very reasons. Hundreds of Bacchic worshippers were crucified along the roads leading to Rome. Despite these efforts, the Roman state eventually abandoned its struggle against the followers of Bacchus, and a milder version of the worship of Bacchus was accommodated in Rome.

Early in the 21st century, scholars often compared mystery cults with Christianity. Christianity requires initiation (baptism), and the initiate becomes a member of a community of fellow believers and abandons other groups and forms of worship. Additionally, early Christians met at night and drank wine; these were all-night prayer vigils with communion. Christians were also, like worshippers of Bacchus before them, accused of cannibalism, ritual murder, intoxication, illicit sex, and political conspiracy. Another similarity was the promise of help in the afterlife.

** There is archaeological evidence, such as wall paintings from Pompeii, that suggests ritual whipping for purification.
Current scholarship, nevertheless, tends to reject the similarity of Christianity with ancient mystery religions for two reasons:

- Scholars who made the comparison often had a hidden agenda. They wanted to attack the uniqueness of Christian and Jewish monotheism.
- Mystery religions varied from city to city and were often integrated with the many other gods of antiquity. Much scholarship has failed to appreciate these differences.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Do you think it is fair or unfair to compare mystery religions with Christianity? Why?

2. What social benefits do you imagine might have accrued from instituting religious rites that were reserved exclusively for women?
PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUES OF PAGANISM

10
In the ancient world, there were those who sought alternatives to the traditional religious model, those who criticized traditional religion, and those who rejected the gods altogether. And ancient Greek philosophers offered thorough and rational critiques of traditional religion.

**PLATO’S CRITIQUES**

- The Athenian philosopher Plato founded his philosophical school, the Academy, in 387 BCE. Plato’s works feature Socrates as his spokesperson in dramatic dialogue.*

- In one such Socratic discussion, a young man named Euthyphro has brought his father up on charges of murder, according to Athenian law, which left prosecutions up to a self-policing citizenry. This is unusual. Sons are not supposed to prosecute fathers; sons are supposed to obey their fathers. Traditional morality says that sons should help their fathers and hurt their father’s enemies. Euthyphro, however, believes that moral considerations obligate him to prosecute a crime, even if the perpetrator is his own father.

- Socrates is impressed, and they begin a discussion of the sources of morality and ethics. Euthyphro believes that what he does is holy, sacred, or moral because it is what the gods love. Socrates, on the other hand, wants to argue that what is sacred, holy, or moral does not enjoy that status from the fact that the gods love and approve it but rather from its own intrinsic nature. The gods, as beneficent and moral beings in their own right, naturally love what is in itself intrinsically moral. Or, as Socrates puts it to his young friend:

  Just consider this question:—Is that which is holy loved by the gods because it is holy, or is it holy because it is loved by the gods?

* Plato is the ventriloquist animating Socrates. Socrates wrote nothing.
Plato, through Socrates, thoroughly undermines traditional religion by arguing that it is not up to the gods what is moral, ethical, or sacred, but that these values exist independently and do not depend on divine sanction. Plato undermines traditional religion even more thoroughly in his *Republic*, which outlines the ideal city-state. There, we read that the poets, who represent popular religious conceptions, tell lies about the gods.

Plato cites these verses of Homer as egregiously false:

The gods themselves are moved by prayers.
And thus human beings, by means of sacrifice and soothing vows
And incense and libation, influence divine will,
This is why they pray, whenever they have sinned, and made transgression.

Plato finds these verses of Homer reprehensible because Plato’s gods are morally perfect. They are not susceptible to persuasion. Plato also singles out personal religious cults:

And they produce a bushel of books of Musaeus and Orpheus, the offspring of the Moon and of the Muses, as they claim, and these books that they use in their rituals, and make *not only* ordinary men *but* states believe that there really are remissions of sins and purifications for deeds of injustice, by means of sacrifice and pleasant sport for the living, and that there are also special rites for the deceased, which they call ceremonies, that deliver us from evils in that other world, while terrible things await those who have neglected to sacrifice.
Plato’s succinct list undermines just about everything about traditional ancient Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Greek religion. Plato asserts that prayers, sacrifices, and the rest have no efficacy because the gods are good, and they are not moved, according to Plato, by some sort of base commerce with human beings. The gods cannot be the source of evil. God is good. Therefore, the evil that God inflicts is good, perhaps in ways that we fail to appreciate.

In the end, Plato famously wishes to banish most poetry from his ideal state on the grounds that poets promulgate false belief about gods. There will be room for a little poetry, but as the Republic puts it, “We can admit no poetry into our city save only hymns to the gods and the praises of good men.” Poetry may only praise perfect gods.

EARLIER PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUES

Socrates and Plato were not original in criticizing traditional religion. Fragments of earlier philosophers tell a similar story. About a century earlier, Xenophanes of Colophon, for example, wrote that Hesiod and Homer have attributed to the gods all things that are shameful and a reproach: thievery, adultery, and deception of each other.

His 6th-century contemporary Heraclitus criticized sacrifice:

They purify themselves of blood by blood; they are crazy, as if one, having stepped into the mud, were to wash with mud. [...] Furthermore they pray to these statues as if one were to have a conversation with houses.

There was already a long philosophical tradition that did not want to attribute base motives and evil deeds to gods.
But this is a fascinating conundrum. If one insists that the gods are all good all the time and one takes away their capacity for evil, as Socrates and Plato did so thoroughly, one renders traditional religion ridiculous. What need do the gods—immortal and morally perfect—have of sacrifices from us? Why should we make vows, pray, and make deals if the gods do not care about such things, if such commerce is base?

If Socrates truly pursued such logic openly in the Athenian marketplace (the ancient Agora)—attracting young, conservative, and wealthy aristocrats who aped his style and harangued the less wealthy and democratically inclined public—is it any surprise that the Athenian state executed Socrates on charges† of corrupting the young by undermining traditional religion?

Many have condemned the Athenians, who sentenced Socrates to death, but the prevailing opinion in antiquity was that the state officials were justified. Relentless rational analysis of traditional religious beliefs and practices undermines a system that not only governs daily relations between human beings and divine forces, but also personal relationships through marriage vows, oaths and contracts, inheritance and property, and more.

In the poetry of Homer and Hesiod, as well as in the works of such later Roman authors as Ovid, we encounter gods who, like human beings, can be generally good or predominantly malign—at times constant, at others capricious and moody. Such gods explain in an intuitively logical, and thus satisfying, way a world that is likewise unpredictable, full of good and evil and of justice and injustice. Such gods are exceedingly powerful, but human beings can—through prayers, vows, and sacrifices—approach them, and if not procure favors, possibly at least keep their destructive anger at bay.

† “Socrates is a wrongdoer because he corrupts the youth and does not believe in the gods the state believes in, but in other new spiritual beings.”
What happens when both a supreme god and the gods more generally become morally perfect—without blemish, perfect arbiters of right and wrong—as well as indifferent to our puny, laughable, and despicable efforts at bribery? Who becomes responsible for all that is wrong in human society? Many of the ills and much of the injustice we suffer we inflict on ourselves.

**OTHER PHILOSOPHICAL SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT**

Athens protected traditional religious values, Socrates was condemned to death, and moral philosophy moved from the 5th-century BCE Athenian Agora to Plato’s Academy in the 4th century. Later varieties of Platonism moved toward monotheism and would eventually find fertile ground in a new religion from Roman Judaea, but that lay some centuries in the future.

Even further in the future, in 529 CE, the Christian emperor Justinian would close permanently the philosophical schools of Athens on the grounds that these schools, dating back to the 4th century BCE, were pagan—even though the philosophers of these schools had for more than a thousand years supplied the very critiques of paganism that early Christian fathers subsequently deployed so effectively against the adherents of traditional religion.

After his teacher Plato’s death, Aristotle left the Academy and established his own school, known as the Lyceum. Like his teacher, Aristotle dismissed traditional accounts of the gods, declaring in his *Metaphysics*:

How can gods who require nourishment be eternal? It is not worthwhile to consider seriously the subtleties of mythologists.

Aristotle gives credit to his predecessors Xenophanes and Parmenides for identifying the unity of god and asserts that in his school:

We hold, then that God is a living being, eternal, most good; and therefore life and continuous eternal existence belong to God; for that is what God is.
Aristotle’s philosophy made fundamental contributions to logic, science, and the ethics of human conduct in this world and thus represents yet another step away from the world of traditional Greek religion.

Stoicism, founded by Zeno (who came to Athens in 313 BCE), established God as the creator of the universe and the one who perfectly arranged the machinery of this world so that everything that happens is not only preordained by his foresight, but also preordained for the best. How could a perfect God have decreed otherwise?

Despite the predestination of our fates, we somehow retain free will, and our obligation is to cultivate inner virtue according to rational logic and to banish emotions, which tend to lead reason astray. The philosophy also promoted work in this world. Stoicism was popular among leaders of the ruling classes, especially after the Mediterranean became Roman.

Ancient Skepticism and Atheism

One school of thought, founded by Pyrrho of Elis, yet another late 4th/early 3rd century BCE philosopher, suspended belief altogether. This was skepticism, and it was a school of thought that prevailed for a period in the Academy founded by Plato. According to skeptic doctrine, some arguments could not be decided. Do the gods exist? Perhaps. Perhaps not.

† The Stoic school was named after the stoa poikile, a "painted porch" adjacent to the central market of Athens, where Zeno taught.
Agnosticism and the suspension of judgment are perhaps not as satisfying as conviction, especially in moments that require decisive action. It is easier to inspire others if one has a fixed doctrine and a determined purpose. Ancient skepticism faded in popularity, then enjoyed a revival in the 1st century BCE, only to fade again.

A contemporary of the skeptic Pyrrho of Elis, Epicurus of Samos, bought a house in Athens around 306 BCE with a yard, where he would gather his students for discussions. The yard and his school became known as the Garden. According to Epicurus, the world is made up of atoms, and the gods, whose existence he does not deny, are, like us, combinations of atoms. But the gods take no interest in us or our world.

Our job as human beings is to secure happiness in this life, but we should not do this by overeating or through wanton sexual indulgences, as vulgar interpretations of Epicureanism might lead one to think. Indeed, such activities may bring transitory pleasures, but also disease, later pain, and lingering suffering. On the contrary, one should instead lead a life of sobriety and virtue and the pursuit of justice.

Because the gods do not care about us, we are free to support each other, and when we die, we disappear with the dissolution of the atoms that came together to create us. We therefore need have no fear of death, which motivates a great deal of traditional religious practices.

Declaring that the gods are merely combinations of atoms that take no interest in the world that we inhabit is, in essence, atheism.
In any population, there have probably always existed in varying proportions the devout, the moderately religious, skeptics, and atheists. How robust or numerous each group may be in any given age depends on the spirit of that age as well as the law. To profess atheism under a communist regime was, of course, easier than espousing atheism in public in the United States. Conversely, public professions of devout faith carry less social cost in some societies than in others, especially if one professes the prevailing faith. And, truth be told, there are opportunists. Are politicians truly as devout as they profess in their public speeches?

We are fortunate to possess many works of the 1st-century BCE politician Cicero—both his public speeches, in which he professed the greatest reverence for Rome’s traditional gods, and his philosophical speculations on the nature of the gods, where he expressed great skepticism.

This makes sense, of course. The politician of the ruling class expresses in public what he knows will be effective with his less educated, but more devout, audience. And without mass media to widely circulate his philosophical speculations, Cicero was safe to publish them.

In literature, enemies are also depicted as godless. But if we leave behind the ruling classes and the literature of the few to instead contemplate the attitudes of the many, average ancient people most likely did not join strange cults or concern themselves with the distinctions of competing philosophical schools.
And in the illiterate countryside, where most of the many lived, such competing doctrines remained distant indeed. Most of these people likely showed up for traditional and customary rituals out of habit. This group represents part of the power of ancestral religion. Who can be bothered to switch religions? How popular, then, were deviant cults, the various philosophical schools, or atheism in the ancient world? We have no statistics.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Inasmuch as Socrates (as represented by Plato) did indeed question the traditional view of what the gods wanted or needed from human beings, do you think the charge of impiety was perhaps justified? How would you defend Socrates against this charge?

2. The philosophers thought it was absurd that the gods could need or even want anything from human beings. In what ways are perfect gods less satisfactory (from a human point of view) than imperfect gods who do crave things from us?
With regard to traditional ancient Greek religion, there was little change in attitude from the Bronze Age, as documented by Homer in the 800s BCE, until the fall of paganism in the 4th and 5th centuries CE—a period of more than a thousand years. And what held true for the Greeks more or less held true for ancient Romans and other Indo-European peoples as well.

**GRAVES OF THE MYCENEAEN BRONZE AGE**

- Heinrich Schliemann, a German businessman and self-funded archaeologist, grew up believing in Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as literal history. This was at a time when scholars considered the works pure myth and were questioning the very existence of an author named Homer. Schliemann, however, using these literary works as his guide, famously discovered grave goods at Mycenae in Greece as well as treasures at Hisarlik in Turkey, the ancient site of Troy.

- The ancient graves of Mycenae from around 1500 BCE reveal bodies that were buried whole.* The bodies were completely clothed, adorned with gold jewelry. The men were buried with their weapons as well as with other equipment they had used in life. The women, too, were clothed, decked with jewelry and equipped with household items, including dishes, cutlery, and images of gods.

- Such items—golden drinking cups, signet rings, the famous (so-called) mask of Agamemnon, small boxes worked in gold and covered with images, golden diadems—are often on display in museums. These graves displayed wealth in death to the living before the treasures disappeared under the earth for thousands of years.

* Bodies were put in the ground, or *humus* in Latin, which means that bereaved survivors practiced inhumation.
Did these grave goods demonstrate belief in life after death? Perhaps, if comparative evidence from Egypt is any indication. Indeed, why carry such things into the grave if they were not going to be of some use? There was some use in this as a statement for the living: “Hey, our family is so rich, we can afford to throw all this away!”

Later literary evidence sketches for us a conception of how ancient Greeks conceived of life after death. Our earliest literary witnesses offer glum views of a shadowy existence. In the 11th book of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus visits Hades, where he pours blood into a pit, according to the instructions he received. Odysseus describes the souls who appear:

Then out of Erebus  
The souls of the dead gathered, the ghosts  
Of brides and youths and worn-out old men  
And soft young girls with hearts new to sorrow,  
And many men wounded with bronze spears,  
Killed in battle, bearing blood-stained arms.  
They drifted up to the pit from all sides  
With an eerie cry, and pale fear seized me.

From this grim description, we gather that the dead retain an image of who they most recently were before they died. After Odysseus recovers from his initial shock, he begins to converse with the spirits and even expresses admiration for how well Achilles seems to do in death:

No man, Achilles,  
Has ever been as blessed as you, or ever will be.  
While you were alive the army honored you  
Like a god, and now you are here  
You rule the dead with might. You should not  
Lament your death at all, Achilles.
Achilles’s response, however, confirms that Odysseus’s first impression was closer to the mark:

Don’t try to sell me on death, Odysseus,
I’d rather be a hired hand back up on earth,
Slaving away for some poor dirt farmer
Than lord it over all these withered dead.

We may compare the gloom and pale spirits of Homer’s Hades, where the dead mingle in rather undifferentiated crowds, to earlier Mesopotamian descriptions. In a work entitled “The Descent of Ishtar† to the Underworld,” we read:

The dark house, the house which none leave who have entered it, the road from which there is no way back, the house where the entrants are bereft of light, where dust is their fare and clay their food, where they see no light, residing in darkness, where they are clothed like birds, with wings for garments and where over the door and bolt is spread dust.

On the gloom of the underworld, Bronze Age Greeks and ancient Mesopotamians agree, though this conception would change with time.

HOW THE BEREAVED DEALT WITH THE DEAD

Although we have testimony about the fate of the dead surviving as souls in some shadowy afterlife, it is the living who deal with the absence of the deceased as well as with the lifeless body that the deceased has left behind. Ancient peoples also believed that the ceremonies they performed for the corpse materially benefited the still-sentient spirit that had been separated from its body.

† A goddess of sexual love who corresponds to Greek Aphrodite.
It was thus a universal and solemn religious duty for ancient Greeks to bury the dead. Relatives had to bury their kindred; children had to bury their parents. The Athenian lawgiver Solon legislated that even children who had been neglected and abused by their parents—and thus released from parental authority by the state—had to bury their parents. It was both a legal and religious duty. Even Plato’s philosophical ideal state required this pious duty of its citizens.

And the duty went beyond mere relatives. If one encountered an unburied corpse, one was supposed to throw some dirt on it, because one of the worst-possible fates was to have one’s body left unburied as “plunder for dogs” or “a feast for birds.”

By the 800s BCE, when Homer was writing, and generally thereafter, the body was burned on a pyre, after which the bones were collected, placed in an urn, and then buried. We may thus talk of “burial” even when speaking of bodies that were first cremated.

After the spirit has departed from the body, care of the corpse begins. One must close the eyes, bathe the body, anoint the body with oil, and place the body on a resting bed with its feet turned toward the door. After the invention of money, an obol for the ferryman, Charon, was placed in the mouth. The corpse is then decked out in fine clothes and perfumes. According to the 2nd century CE rhetorician Lucian:

Next come cries of distress, wailing of women, tears on all sides, beaten breasts, torn hair, bloody cheeks. Perhaps, too, clothing is rent and dust sprinkled on the head, and [...] they roll on the ground repeatedly and dash their heads against the floor.
Open lamentation and expressions of grief were customary for both men and women—and remained so from the 800s BCE until Lucian’s time in the 2nd century CE, and beyond.

Also from Homer’s time until late antiquity, a funeral pyre would be erected. Friends carried the corpse on a bier to the pyre, where they burned the body. Depending on the gender and status of the deceased, weapons or other gear were thrown into the flames. Sacrificial animals and sometimes human beings, too, were burned with the body.

In the *Iliad*, at Achilles’s comrade Patroclus’s funeral pyre, Homer tells us that in addition to a huge pile of wood, they placed the bodies of slaughtered sheep and oxen on the pyre. This expensive funeral included 12 fine young victims from an enemy city’s best families—a human sacrifice.‡

The funeral pyre is lit, and people continue to mourn. As Homer reports:

> Achilles wailed for his friend as he burned his bones,
> Moving slowly about the pyre, groaning heavily.

After the fires have died down, wine is poured on the embers, and the bones are gathered and doused with more wine before they are placed in an urn. Achilles gives instructions to his Greek comrades:

> First quench the funeral fire with wine,
> Wherever it burned. Then gather the bones
> Of Patroclus, son of Menoetius. Pick them out
> Carefully. They are easily recognized,
> For he lay in the middle, while the others burned
> Off to the sides, men and horses jumbled.

‡ Though in historical times we do not read about human sacrifice at funeral pyres, funeral ceremonies for ruling-class Romans frequently included displays of gladiatorial combats with fights to the death. Was this human sacrifice? Or mere entertainment?
The urn is put in a box and buried in a small mound. The grave is then marked.

After the Greeks became literate, they erected tombstones with inscriptions that provide additional insights into religious attitudes toward death.

Depending on the magnificence of the funeral, it might also include choruses, dances, and games that went on for a number of days. The conclusion of ceremonies was a meal.

In more historical times, especially in democratic Athens, funeral ceremonies were limited by law. The Athenian lawgiver Solon, we are told, shifted the beginning of ceremonies from dusk to dawn, and mourning was limited to 11 days. To deny such ceremonies—even to an enemy—was a religious crime.
There were exceptions. Traitors and criminals could be denied burial, but this was a severe punishment indeed, as the consequences could be dangerous for the living. The gods could be offended and become angry, of course, but more dangerously, the soul, whose body has been left unburied, is condemned to wander without rest. This ghost becomes unhappy and potentially malevolent.

The only comfort for the dead is a proper burial, and the fear of not being buried may well have been greater than the fear of death, as death is inevitable, but a burial is not something that one can arrange on one’s own after one has died. The dead must rely on the living.

**WORSHIP OF ANCESTRAL SPIRITS**

To ancient people, the dead weren’t really gone but retained a ghostly existence. And this is what inscriptions on gravestones seem to indicate.

Ancient Greeks set up inscriptions to their deceased relatives with a Greek phrase that means “for the gods of the earth.” Ancient Romans used a similar phrase in Latin, *dis manibus*, “for the deceased spirits,” and evidence from the *Rigveda* indicates that ancient Indians similarly revered their departed, whose spirits were conceived of as returning to their ancestors. Once dead, all spirits become members of the deceased family known collectively as “ancestral spirits.”

Worship of ancestral spirits as well as tending to their graves was a duty of the male head of household and something that other members of the household participated in, too. One’s ancestors did more than simply disappear into the ground; they remained a part of the family.

At the gravesite were altars where the dead, like the gods, could continue to receive offerings in the form of libations (drink offerings) as well as solid foods. Peaceful relations were maintained with the properly honored dead by regularly caring for the graves. Such family spirits could even become tutelary deities, or guardian spirits, for their family.
And when such departed spirits belonged to men or women who had accomplished more than most mortals, they could be worshipped beyond their families as heroes. And heroes sometimes become gods in their own right. Herakles even joined the Olympians. Following such a progression, one can understand the logic of those who argue that cult and care for the dead represent the first source of ancient religious practices—and thus the gods.

Each family had its own religious practices, household gods, and cult. Maintaining relations with ancestral spirits—the spirits of deceased relatives—played a crucial role in that family’s worship.

The general reverence for one’s deceased ancestors—that is, the collective spirits of an extended family going back generation upon generation—was a powerful force for conservative values opposed to innovation. The true family is not just the extended family on this earth, but a communion of the living and the dead.

As mortals, we are all destined to die, and ancient religion provided a way to structure the removal of the dead, explain what happened to the spirit of the deceased, and use the ceremonies that cared for departed souls to structure family and social life. Some minds rebelled against traditional conceptions, but the beliefs, rites, and ceremonies of the ancient Greeks proved remarkably consistent century after century.
Just as the gods join human beings for a communal meal after sacrifice, the dead continue to share in the meals offered by family members at their graves and altars.

If, then, we imagine a world where our ancestors are not truly gone but remain watchful and we know that we, too, will dwell among them after our own brief sojourn in the light of this world, we will work to maintain their good will and also ensure that our own family bestows upon us those same ceremonies that will ensure continuity. This logic promotes constant vigilance to ensure that rites and ceremonies remain unchanged and unaltered and helps explain the impressive continuity of attitudes and procedures that spanned a thousand years.

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

1. One of the most horrifying fates for a traditionally religious ancient Greek was the possibility that one’s corpse would not receive a proper burial. Are there any fates that from a modern religious perspective might be compared with this?

2. Ancient epitaphs sometimes seem to bring the deceased back to life, so that the deceased can tell their stories. What is the impact of such epitaphs on the living? Why, by way of comparison, are epitaphs in our cemeteries so silent?
As the Greeks entered the historical period, they began recording their interactions with—as well as their debts to—Egyptian culture. Cultural influences become even stronger after Alexander the Great’s conquest of Egypt in 331 BCE, the subsequent foundation of Alexandria, and the rule over Egypt by the Macedonian Greek Ptolemies from 305 to 30 BCE. During these centuries of Greek rule and during the subsequent centuries of Roman rule, Egyptian culture and religion fascinated both Greeks and Romans, and the gods of ancient Egypt found new worshippers. As the Mediterranean world became more integrated, religious influences intermingled.

**EGYPTIAN TEXTS OF THE AFTERLIFE**

- Thanks to the discovery of the Rosetta Stone in 1799, we have been able to read, only since the 19th century, hieroglyphic texts that date from 2500 to 2000 BCE.

- Some texts derive from the interior walls of pyramids. These texts concern the afterlife of those interred inside the pyramids. They are exclusively royal and written not for our edification but to serve those inside the tomb.

- Utterance number 438 from English Egyptologist R. O. Faulkner’s compilation of *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* proclaims that the deceased king is immortal, but this is more than a mere declaration. The text in a way confers immortality by speaking the fact of the king’s immortality into existence:

> Oho! Oho! I will make it for you, this shout of acclaim.

> O my father, because you have no human fathers and you have no human mothers;

> Your father is the Great Wild Bull,

> your mother is the Maiden.

> Live the life, for you have not died the death.
The deceased is declared the son of gods (the bull and the maiden), and his human lineage is denied (“you have no human fathers and you have no human mothers”). Therefore—and this is logical enough—he did not die. This utterance also reveals the location of the land of the dead: the West. Or, as Utterance 438 puts it:

The Great Cavern [...] is opened to him, (even he) the Great One of the litter, the Great One of the carrying chair of the Foremost of the Westerners.

The king is also promised food and water from festivals that will be celebrated on earth:

They give you water at the monthly festivals and at the half-monthly festivals, and give to the great ones, you lead the lesser ones; yours are the rib-pieces from the slaughter-block of the Foremost of the Westerners in accordance with your translation (i.e., transformation and transportation) to the possessors of veneration.

This relatively simple utterance contains key concepts that will remain present in Egyptian religion for thousands of years: the potential for a soul to become immortal, the location of the afterlife in the West, and the desirability of receiving nourishment from mortals on earth.

Other utterances guarantee the king food and access to the gods. One even assists in the transformation of the king into a star. What is more immutable, permanent, and enduring than a star? All earthly things are subject to decay, but not the stars, not the gods, not the kings or pharaohs. In Utterance 442, the immortal soul, now a star, rises and sets with Orion:

You will regularly ascend with Orion from the eastern region of the sky, you will regularly descend with Orion into the western region of the sky.
How did the kings achieve this exalted status? It was expensive. A pyramid housed the body, stored food (both real food and pictorial versions), and supplied servants in the form of clay figurines called *shabtis* or *ushabtis*.

The pyramid texts reveal the animating power of human speech. The words of these texts declare, define, and thus create a reality for the next world: immortality in the first instance and all the good things of this life. A third element remains, however: the actions of the living. The living conduct festivals, bring offerings, and remember. The living call back into existence in their minds those who have departed.

**THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF DEATH**

The long history of Egypt is also the history of the democratization of death—or the democratization of immortality, assuming that immortality is what one would want upon leaving this place. We see the democratization of the afterlife first in the types of materials used to inscribe the texts that accompany the dead.

Texts on pyramids dedicated to kings are found during the fifth and sixth dynasties, beginning around 2500 BCE. Texts for nobles appear during the 11th and 12th dynasties on wooden coffins. These are called coffin texts. Texts for commoners begin appearing during the 18th and 19th dynasties.
How could commoners afford texts that were previously only within the reach of kings and noblemen? They printed the texts on papyrus.

The power of the word, the power to animate eternity, became as cheap as paper, which was by no means free. The papyrus rolls that contained the texts—or, more precisely, the spells—that would help the possessor gain access to blissful eternity varied in length. The number of spells included on the papyrus varied according to what one could afford as well as the perceived need of the purchaser. Thus, social distinctions were not eliminated entirely.

The collections of spells contained in such papyrus rolls are known as the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Although scholars posit that these scrolls date back to circa 1500 BCE, our earliest extant fragments date back to about 800 BCE. We also possess fragments from as late as the 2nd century CE, giving us a total history for such scrolls of some 3,000 years.

With democratization, however, came an increase in complexity. We find, for example, a complex picture of human beings as they are embodied (that is, encased in the flesh). The human body was not so much dross to be tossed aside. Even in death, the body\* required care, as did the spirit.

**SPELLS FOR THE EGYPTIAN AFTERLIFE**

According to ancient Egyptian conception, a whole human being consists of a natural body (*khat*), a spiritual body (*sahu*), a heart (*ab*), a double (*ka*), a soul (*ba*), a shadow (*khaibit*), a casing (*khu*), a form (*sekhem*), and a name (*ren*). Although most of these elements were capable of moving independently, they were also bound together inseparably and depended on one another for mutual welfare. The key for a successful transition from this world to the next was to preserve the harmony of the various parts.

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\* The body was carefully preserved through mummification. The upper classes had their organs stored separately in jars. They were buried with riches and food and clay figurines as servants (*shabtis*). Details regarding mummification and the grave goods of the upper classes can be examined in museums.
To ensure harmony, there were some 200 spells that could be buried with the corpse—in addition to the care lavished upon the corpse. It was not an easy task to get from here to there, and religious texts in the form of spells helped the deceased break through to the other side.

Our first selection from the *Book of the Dead* is an introductory hymn to the sun god Ra (also known as Re). Each day, Ra travels where the deceased must go: the Beautiful West. It is thus convenient to hitch a ride with him. Ra will bring us to Osiris,† lord of the dead:

> Let there be prepared for me a seat in the Boat of the Sun on the day whereon the god saileth. Let me be received in the presence of Osiris in the Land of Truth-speaking.

Once we have taken a ride in the sun god’s boat to the Beautiful West, we require an introduction to Osiris. A second spell provides that crucial introduction:

> Homage to thee, Osiris, Lord of Eternity, King of the Gods, whose names are manifold, whose forms are holy, thou being of hidden form in the temples, whose Ka is holy. Thou art the governor of Tattu (Busiris), and also the mighty one in Letopolis.

In addition to identifying Osiris precisely, the spell goes on to praise Osiris extensively. But eventually, we arrive at the point:

† According to ancient Egyptian myth, Osiris—a good king of Egypt—died, rose again, and came back to life to become king, judge, and protector of the dead in the Beautiful West. The resurrection of Osiris led Greeks to compare him to Dionysus, who similarly offered assistance in the next world.†
Grant thou to me glory in heaven, and power upon earth, and truth-speaking in the Divine Underworld, and [the power to] sail down the river to Tetu in the form of a living Ba-soul, and [the power to] sail up the river to Abydos in the form of a Benu bird, and [the power to] pass in through and to pass out from, without obstruction, the doors of the lords of the Tuat. Let there be given unto me bread-cakes in the House of Refreshing, and sepulchral offerings of cakes and beer, and propitiatory offerings [...] and a permanent homestead in Sekhet-Aaru, with wheat and barley therein, to the Double of the Osiris, the scribe N.

Anyone’s name may be substituted for the scribe “N,” and then that person, too, may receive the same benefits.

These texts are eminently practical. Moreover, as opposed to Mesopotamia, where rewards and punishments were handed out indiscriminately, the Egyptian afterlife takes account of deeds on earth. The Egyptian scheme is moral.

In fact, Anubis, the hound or jackal of hell, weighs the heart in a balance against a feather provided by Maat, goddess of justice. Sin is heavy, so one must hope that one’s heart is light. Otherwise, the goddess Ammit—a combination of lion, hippopotamus, and crocodile—will devour it.
Here is an excerpt from a spell relating to the weighing of the heart:

My heart, my mother; my heart, my mother! My heart whereby I came into being! May naught stand up to oppose me at [my] judgment, may there be no opposition to me in the presence of the Chiefs [...]; may there be no parting of thee from me in the presence of him that keepeth the Balance! Thou art my KA, which dwelleth in my body [...]. Mayest thou come forth into the place of happiness whither we go. May the [...] officials, who make the conditions of the lives of men, not cause my name to stink, and may no lies be spoken against me in the presence of the God.

But this speech is not enough. One must declare one’s innocence before 42 separate gods concerned with 42 potential sins. This is a confession of innocence on 42 counts and is sometimes known as the negative confession.

If one makes it past the tribunal of Osiris, Maat, Anubis, and Ammit, there are still potential troubles standing between the individual and a pleasant afterlife. The Egyptian Book of the Dead provides the spells that will help the deceased through the eternity that follows judgment. One spell will allow the deceased to come out of his tomb so that he may travel wherever he likes.

If, finally, one has taken care of all aspects of one’s personality and has been buried with all necessary spells, what is the best one can hope to obtain? As our final spell informs us, the ultimate goal is to become like the gods:

I am Yesterday. “Seer of Millions of Years” is my name. I am the Lord of Eternity. [...] I am Horus. [I] traverse millions of years. I have decreed [the establishing] of my throne. [...] No evil thing of any shape or kind shall spring up against me, and no baleful object, and no harmful thing, and no disastrous thing shall happen unto me. I open the door in heaven. I rule my throne.
The Egyptian idea of a judgment in the next world that takes into account one’s deeds in this world had an impact on Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian thinking. As time moves forward, Greco-Roman conceptions of Hades take on similar features. Hades enlists Rhadamanthus, Minos, Aeacus, and Triptolemus as judges, and the dead are punished in Tartarus while the good enjoy a blessed afterlife in Elysium. Still, the Greco-Roman afterlife never becomes as well worked out as the Egyptian scheme. Similarly, the gods of Egypt, when they escape their original geographical confines, become simplified versions of their earlier manifestations.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Although Egyptian texts were lost to us for millennia, knowledge of, and interest in, Egyptian religion was sustained and intense from early Greek through imperial Roman times. Why do you think scholars of the 19th and early 20th centuries might have been reluctant to acknowledge Egyptian influences on classical religion?

2. In comparison with Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome, Egypt offers a well-developed conception of the afterlife. What points of comparison do you see between Egyptian conceptions and depictions of the afterlife and those in Christianity?
ANCIENT ROMAN
ANCESTOR WORSHIP

13
Although Roman religion shares many similarities with Greek practices, Roman religion was infused with a more deeply conservative spirit, and this conservatism informs other aspects of their religion, too. Funerary practices and beliefs around the dead represent some of the deepest layers of the Indo-European tradition. In the ancient Indian *Rigveda*, we are able to observe some of this tradition’s most ancient prayers and hymns, but not, unfortunately, in historical context, as ancient Indian history is poorly documented. Nevertheless, it is instructive to examine some of the most ancient documents written in a language, Sanskrit, that is cognate with Greek, Latin, English, and other European languages, as they preserve a perhaps-common inheritance for the original speakers of these languages.

**DEATH IN THE RIGVEDA**

Despite the fact that there are contradictions regarding death in the *Rigveda*, there are patterns that align with both Greek and Roman practices. A hymn addressed to Yama (lord of the dead) and the fathers outlines the basic idea:

The one who has passed beyond along the great, steep straits, spying out the path for many, [...] the gatherer of men, King Yama—honor him with the oblation. Yama was the first to find the way for us, this pasture that shall not be taken away. Where our ancient fathers passed beyond, there everyone who is born follows, each on his own path.
Yama was the first man to die, and the fathers, or ancestors, are gathered to him. A verse that is recited directly to the dead man makes clear that this should be the destiny for his spirit, too:

Go forth, go forth on those ancient paths on which our ancient fathers passed beyond. There you shall see the two kings, Yama and Varuṇa, rejoicing in the sacrificial drink. Unite with the fathers, with Yama, with the rewards of your sacrifices and good deeds, in the highest heaven. Leaving behind all imperfections, go back home again; merge with a glorious body.

How do we do this? A hymn to the funeral fire helps explain the process. The speaker addresses Agni, god of fire:

The goat is your share. Burn [the deceased] with your heat. Let your brilliant light and flame burn him. […] Carry this man to the world of those who have done good deeds. Set him free again to go to the fathers, O Agni, when he has been offered as an oblation in you, and wanders with the sacrificial drink.

In addition to the rituals that accompany the funeral of the deceased, rituals remain important in the care for the dead, as the dead retain power:

Our fathers, […] all worthy of Soma—let us remain in favor with them, as they are worthy of sacrifice, and let them be helpful and kind.

Dead ancestors thus appear semidivine, and they seem to enjoy feeding through sacrifice as well as occasional drink offerings of soma,* an intoxicating drink that represents a parallel to the libations of wine in ancient Greece. Such offerings keep the ancestors from getting angry. In return, the ancestors can offer help to the living. Rituals—including drink offerings, sacrifice, and correctly spoken words—allow negotiation between the two realms.

* An ambrosial drink frequently mentioned in the Rigveda.
Other hymns complicate this picture. One funeral hymn suggests that different fates await, depending on one’s social class. Those in the best position include warriors who lose their lives in battle, those who give generously to priests, and the sages and priests themselves.

The hymn to the funeral fire also suggests that destinations are possible beyond Yama and the fathers. The possibilities for the deceased spirit include a journey “to Yama,” “to the sky or to the earth,” “to the billowy ocean,” “to the flowing streams of light,” “to the waters, or the plants,” “to the sun, or to the dawns,” “to the high mountains,” and “to this whole moving universe.” Or, “[i]f your spirit has gone to what has been and what is to be, far away, we turn it back to you to dwell and to live” (i.e., here on earth).

Another hymn celebrating release through a funeral fire elaborates on this topic in an address to the dead man:

May your eye go to the sun, your life’s breath to the wind. Go to the sky or to earth, as is your nature; or go to the waters, if that is your fate. Take root in the plants with your limbs.

We may contrast this option with the possibilities offered by a burial hymn:

Creep away to this broad, vast earth, the mother that is kind and gentle. She is a young girl, soft as wool to anyone who makes offerings, let her guard you from the lap of destruction. Open up earth; do not crush him. Be easy for him to enter and to burrow in. Earth, wrap him up as a mother wraps a son in the edge of her skirt.

We seem to find a combination of fire and burial that is also similar to Greek and Roman practice.

So, according to readings on death in the Rigveda, the possible fates awaiting the dearly departed are as follows:

- The soul may go to heaven (to abide with Yama and the ancestors).
- One may receive a new body.
- The soul may be dispersed to different regions.
Yama helps us understand the fate of the deceased. Yama was the first man to die and thus the man who made life possible. Death, in effect, enables life. By choosing to die—by offering himself as the first sacrifice—Yama created death, and thus life (which is opposed to death).

Death then becomes a process, involving many people. Ritual brings all concerned together. The whole process, however, follows the pattern established by Yama and is assisted by the god of fire, Agni. The process that is death in the *Rigveda* is the *Patha Yamasya*, or the “Path of Yama.”

When someone follows the *Patha Yamasya* and has died, the body must be dealt with. Priests are called. The family gathers. The body is placed on the pyre. Agni is called on to consume the corpse, but not completely—Agni receives a goat as his share. Instead, Agni cooks the deceased to perfection and sets the deceased’s spirit free. This process offers a series of choices. The deceased spirit may go to Yama and the ancestors or perhaps elsewhere. Thanks to the process, however, and because of the ritual, the paths are open.

The mourners can take comfort in what they have accomplished for the deceased. And the world can go on, despite the discontinuity introduced by a death, because the model established by Yama has been followed. Each participant—living, dead, and divine—has been placed in proper relation to the other, thanks to the transformative power of religious ritual.

**ROMAN CONCEPTIONS OF THE FATE OF THE DEAD**

The ancient Romans shared an Indo-European linguistic inheritance with the ancient authors of the *Rigveda* as well as some conceptions of the fate of the dead.
In their own opinion, the Romans were the most religious people on earth, and by this they meant their knowledge of how to worship the gods. This was the *cultus deorum*: what one must do to cultivate divine forces in order to stay on the best terms with the gods, whose powers can assist or destroy us. Knowing the precise words, rituals, sacrifices, and festival days—and conscientiously keeping all these forms of worship—ensured that the gods would remain at least neutral, if not on one’s side, thus allowing human effort a chance to succeed.

Romans were a deeply conservative people, at least in how they expressed themselves and their cultural ideals, and they believed that their devotion to religion made them different from other peoples. The Romans constantly asserted that their guide was the “custom of our ancestors,” or, in Latin, the *mos maiorum*. The *mos maiorum* is a crucial key to understanding Rome, Roman history, and ancestral Roman religion before the revolution that was Christian monotheism.

The ancestral predecessors of any given generation of Romans represented not just deceased family relations from whom an individual was descended, but still-sentient presences who required attention and care. And the living generation carried the blood of these ancestors, or divine spark, which passed from one generation to the next. The present generation, because it was fleeting, could never rival the importance of past generations—which bestowed all blessings, including language, law, religion, and life itself.

In the Roman approach to funerary practices and continued care for the dead, we can begin to appreciate better some fundamental aspects of Roman religion and society. Just as they did for Greeks and ancient Indians, ancestral spirits mattered. The Romans called them the *di manes*,† or the “good gods.” Ancestral spirits are divine and, as such, enjoy rights and privileges and have needs that are incumbent on the living to fulfill—or they may become angry.

† The word *di* is a contracted form of *dei*, the plural of *deus*, “god.” The word *manes*, which we translate as “ancestral spirits,” derives from an adjective that the Romans thought meant “good.”
It was a solemn duty to bury the dead. If Romans encountered an unburied body, they were required to throw earth three times onto the corpse’s face. Departed spirits could not rest or travel to their fellow manes unless proper rites had been performed.

When someone was dying, it was the duty of the closest relation to catch the breath of the dying person in his or her mouth. At the moment of death, one cried out and then called the person’s name three times to ensure that the person was truly dead.‡

After it’s certain that the person has died, lamentation begins. This includes groans, cries, calling on the deceased by name, and saying goodbye. After the cries and lamentation, the body is washed with warm water, anointed with spices and oils, and dressed. Ruling-class men are dressed in the clothing appropriate to the highest magistracy or office held, and rings are placed on their fingers. Women are dressed in their finest and adorned with jewelry.

The corpse is laid out on a couch that is covered with flowers. Incense burns in censers. A small coin is placed in the mouth for the ferryman. The couch is placed in the main hall, or atrium, with the feet pointed toward the door.

In earlier times, our sources tell us, all funerals took place at night, and the word funeral itself derives from the Latin word funus, which signifies “torch.” Even funerals that took place during the day featured people carrying lit torches, which were also used for lighting the funeral pyre.

‡ This tradition persists for the pope, whose baptismal name is called out three times after he’s died.
The last pagan emperor, Julian, the so-called Apostate, attempted to restore funerals to night in the city of Antioch after the city was already home to many Christians. Julian’s pagan reasoning was that too many daytime funerals disrupted religious ceremonies for the gods above the earth. Rome’s pre-Christian ruling class nevertheless conducted their funerals by day, and, as the ruling class was small, these funerals were not so numerous as to disrupt religious ceremonies.

The body was carried openly on a bier. If the corpse was disfigured or decayed, a coffin could be used with a likeness of the person on the coffin. The funeral parade, or *pompa funebris*, included relatives dressed in mourning who followed behind. Women cried, tore their hair, and lacerated their cheeks. Larger funerals included musicians and sometimes even satirical players who dressed like, and imitated, the voice and mannerisms of the deceased. §

§ Roman military triumphs, which were also religious in nature, included similar satire, and we often see in ancient religion such odd juxtapositions of the solemn and the satirical.
The procession for the distinguished went first to the forum. A speech in praise of the deceased, the *laudatio*, would be delivered from the rostra, or speaker’s platform.

The procession then moved from the city to a burial place outside the city. No one could be buried within city limits. The funeral pyre could be set up at the gravesite or nearby. The closest relation had the honor of lighting the pyre, turning his or her face away as he or she did so. After the fire was reduced to embers, it was extinguished with water or wine, while people called out final farewells. The bones were gathered, washed with wine, and placed in an urn with perfumes and spices. This urn was destined for the grave and sepulchre. Graves and memorials lined the roads leading to and from the city. Many of them still stand.

A meal at the grave represented the end of the service. After the ceremony concluded, a priest purified those present by sprinkling them three times with water from an olive or laurel branch. When mourners returned home, they required further purification. Again, they were sprinkled with water, and the house was swept with a special broom. The funerals of especially wealthy members of the ruling class could include gladiatorial games and free distributions of raw meat for the people.

This brief sketch, however, omits a singular Roman custom. Wax masks, which the Romans called *imagines*, were manufactured from plaster casts taken from the faces of the deceased and were kept in cupboards in the atrium, along with a title card listing all magistracies and important offices held by that person. For the upper classes, their ancestors not only continued to live as *manes*, but their *imagines* had shrines in the living room and attended family funerals in person.
Public festivals ensured that all manes, not just those of the upper classes, received their due. The parentalia, or festival of deceased relatives, were held from February 13th to the 21st. People celebrated by adorning the tombs with flowers, wreaths, and garlands. They brought wine, milk, honey, and oil to the graves and offered the blood of dark victims, especially sheep, cattle, and pigs. They also offered fruits, bread, and salt and ate their meal graveside. The living visited the dead, and they shared meals with them.

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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What pressures does ancestor worship place on each generation to ensure that one’s ancestors (and indeed one’s self) will continue to receive proper rites after one’s own demise?

2. Why might a religion that features the worship of deceased ancestors and relatives as divine beings tend to inhibit social innovations?

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Eating a meal in the open air and placing flowers on a grave represent integral components of pagan ritual. The Christians will have much work to do in rooting out such practices.
The Roman house in many respects was like a temple, inasmuch as many gods dwelled within. As the Roman politician Cicero put it: “What is holier, what is more fortified by every aspect of religion than the house of each and every citizen? Here are their altars, here their hearths, here their household gods. Their sacred objects, their family’s rituals and religious ceremonies are all held here. The house is thus a safe refuge for each individual, from which asylum it is religiously lawful to tear no one.” Who were these gods, and what ceremonies did the citizens of Rome conduct at home, on their own, without the direct supervision of religious or state authorities?

**HOUSEHOLD DEITIES**

* The center of the ancient house, including a Roman house, was the hearth. The Latin word for hearth is *focus*, and the focus of family life was in the kitchen, where the meals were cooked. Vesta was the goddess of the hearth, but the Romans also had gods of the cupboard and supplies, the Penates, which were often kept in cupboards near the hearth. References to the Penates can also be used in a more general sense to include all the gods within a household.

† In addition to these private Penates, there existed public Penates for the state. Vesta, who was adored at every *focus*, or private hearth, likewise had a temple as well as priestesses who cared for the public hearth, Rome’s *focus*. The state had many counterparts to the forms of private worship in typical Roman households.

* From the Latin adjective *penetralia*, meaning “the things deep within.”

† The public Penates were, according to legend, brought to Italy from Troy when the Trojan hero Aeneas escaped Troy’s destruction at the hands of the Greeks. Rome’s public Penates were thus private in origin.
Another set of important deities were the Lares. The guardian of a house was the Lar Familiaris, or “Lar of the Household.” The Lar Familiaris generally stood by the entrance and served as a tutelary deity who received greetings before every departure from the house as well as at every return to it. Like the Penates, the Lares must be classified as either public or domestic and private. Public Lares were worshipped at crossroads, and the cult of these gods was important for slaves as well as for later imperial religion, when the worship of the Lares was reorganized by the emperor Augustus.

The Lares, together with the Penates, represented the most intimate and private gods of the household. Taken together, the Lares and Penates signify the house and the family who live there.

Still, there are more gods than these, including a god of the threshold, Limentinus; a god of the door panels, Forculus; and a god of the hinges, Cardea. These minor deities, whose number was legion, offer another insight into a peculiar feature of Roman religion. These deities, without shape or personality, represent what to us are mere functions but, on reflection, what must have served to populate the world with countless divine forces.

Objects within the house were sacred, too. In addition to the cupboards for the Penates and the lararium for the Lares and other personal gods, the table where the family ate was sacred. The marriage bed, or lectus genialis, in Latin, was also sacred.

† The word genialis derives from the Latin verb for generation and is thus related also to the word genitals, or the organs for generation, as well as to the word genius.
MEN’S ROLE IN HOUSEHOLD WORSHIP

The *genius*—the indwelling spirit that animates an individual and thus represents the living spirit of a man or that man’s tutelary indwelling deity—of the householder, or *pater familias*,§ played an important role in the worship of the household. It was the duty of the family to offer worship to the *genius*.

Just how important the *genius* of the *pater familias* was may be seen in the examples of *lararia* (singular *lararium*) excavated in houses from the ancient city of Pompeii, which was buried in volcanic ash when Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 CE. In an example from the house of the Vettii, two Lares stand on either side of a human figure representing the *genius* of the household.

§ Literally, the “father of the family,” but better translated as the “head of the household.”
The *pater familias* was also the chief priest of the household. The poet Tibullus tells us that when he woke up, he reviewed his dreams for warnings and propitiated the gods with offerings of spelt and salt at his hearth. Prayers and offerings to the household gods were part of starting the day, and they took place before breakfast. All meals included offerings for the Lares in small plates and ended with libations, or drink offerings, to them. Other members of the family were present and participated.

There were special religious observations celebrated at home that pertained to the family’s private sphere, such as arranging an engagement, concluding a marriage, or the new wife’s first offering to the family gods when she entered her husband’s house.

Although it was unseemly to speak of them, Augustine—an early Christian father, later canonized and thus also known as Saint Augustine—described all the gods that helped consummate a Roman marriage on the holy bed of marriage. Although Augustine’s aim was to attack Roman religion, he uses the writings of the republican author Varro, who was an expert in Roman religion. So Augustine’s sources are good when he writes:

> When male and female are joined, the god Iugatinus [“Joiner”] is summoned […]. But the bride must be led home, so the god Domiducus [“Home-leader”] is also employed; to keep her at home, the god Domitius [“Homebody”]; to see that she stays with her husband, the goddess Manturna [“Keeper”] is enlisted.

> What more is needed? […] Why pack the bed-chamber with a throng of deities, when even the wedding attendants withdraw? The object of such packing is not to increase concern for modesty by their imagined presence, but rather to ensure that the bride, though weak as a woman and frightened as a novice, may, if they lend assistance, lose her virginity without any difficulty.

> The goddess Virginensis [“Virginity”] is there, the father-god Subigus [“Plougher”], the mother-goddess Prema [“Presser”], the goddess Pertunda [“Piercer”], Venus [goddess of sexual love], and Priapus [lord of the phallus].”
Each step of the process had its own deity, and the goal was consummation of the marriage. Marriage in Rome was not for the fulfillment of romantic love but for the purpose of producing legitimate children. After a child was born—and each step of the way was supervised by functional deities—the father formally acknowledged the child by picking it up. The gods could be enlisted to protect the child, many of whom died shortly after birth. Augustine writes:

[Varro] mentions [...] three gods who are employed to guard a woman after childbirth, lest the god Silvanus [who was a woodland deity] come in by night and trouble her. To enlist the three guardian gods, three men go about the thresholds of the house at night and strike the threshold first with an axe, next with a pestle, and in the third place sweep it with a broom.

Children who survived received names. Girls were named on the eighth day; boys were named on the ninth. This naming ceremony concluded with a sacrificial offering in the house and a meal. When a boy reached puberty and his father deemed him mature enough to be considered an adult, he put on a toga for the first time and became a man. He also removed the protective charm, or bulla, that he wore around his neck to ward off the evil eye and placed the bulla as an offering to the Lares.

The preparation of a corpse for a funeral was another of the numerous ceremonies that took place in the privacy of the home. The gods were involved with the most mundane aspects of daily life—from dreaming at night, to meals, to opening a door—as well as the significant ceremonies that mark the various stages of life.

Public holidays, too, had their domestic component, including the first day of January and the Saturnalia in late December, when the family exchanged gifts and dined together. In fact, any time a meal took place, the gods received a share.
WOMEN AND DOMESTIC CEREMONIES

- Women naturally took part in domestic ceremonies involving the family, but they also celebrated domestic ceremonies apart from the family.

- Literary testimony survives almost exclusively in the words of men, and some of their commentary is hostile, especially when they describe ceremonies from which they were excluded. Roman authors often suspected orgies when they imagined what women of the ruling class did when they gathered without male supervision in the home of Rome’s chief magistrate for a festival of the Good Goddess, or, as she was known in Latin to men, the Bona Dea. It was forbidden for men to know her true name.

- Priestesses of Vesta and women of the upper classes gathered at night in the house of the highest-ranking official in the city, which in the later republic was the consul. In this way, the celebration could count as one performed on behalf of the whole people. The festival may have taken place in the consul’s house, but every male and every male presence had to be removed. If images of men could not be removed from the house, then those images at least had to be covered.

- The Vestals saw to it that the house was garlanded with flowers and the other accoutrements of a temple. The image of the goddess was set up with vines around her head and snakes around her feet. Although no one was allowed to bring wine, a wine jar was left on the table, and the women drank from it but called it milk.

- Later (male) writers alleged debauchery at the Bona Dea. Here is a taste from a satire by the imperial poet Juvenal, a notorious misogynist:

  Well known to all are the mysteries of the Good Goddess, when the flute stirs the loins and the Maenads of Priapus [lord of the phallus] sweep along, frenzied alike by the horn-blowing and the wine, whirling their locks and howling. What foul longings burn within their breasts! What cries they utter as the passion palpitates within! How drenched their limbs in torrents of old wine!
The description is perhaps an example of overexcited male fantasy. On the other hand, despite the vitriol, even in societies as patriarchal as ancient Rome, religion helped women carve out spaces that were free from men.

If we move down the social scale, we can also point to inscriptions and votive offerings as examples of women’s religious concerns. Inscriptions do not reveal much other than the gratitude offered by the dedicator to a deity for a personal concern, but we can see, for example, in an inscription from republican Rome that a new mother named Sulpicia offers thanks to the *juno*—the indwelling spirit equivalent to the *genius* of men—who oversees and assists with childbirth, Juno Lucina, who helps bring children into the *lux*, or light, of this world. Sulpicia’s dedication reads:

Sulpicia, the daughter of Servius, gladly dedicated this offering to a well-deserving Juno Lucina in thanks for her daughter Paulla Cassia.

Personal health concerns also appear, as in an inscription where Tullia Superiana thanks the goddess of Minerva. In full, it reads:

After the return of her hair, Superiana gladly fulfills this vow to a well-deserving and considerate Minerva.

Terra-cotta uteruses, which served as votive offerings, also testify to women’s health concerns. Such inscriptions and votive offerings document the religious concerns of women—and, yes, they relate to domestic life, but this was the life to which most freeborn women were confined, so it makes sense within the system.

Most of what we know about ancient Roman religion is from a male perspective, but enough testimony survives concerning women’s religious activity that we can gain occasional glimpses into their activities, too.
For a glimpse of women’s religious activity inside the house, we can also point to the Matronalia, a festival celebrated on the first of March. Earlier in their history, Romans began their year in March, so the Matronalia was in origin a New Year’s festival, during which married women honored Juno Lucina. According to Macrobius, a late antique antiquarian writing toward the end of Roman paganism, married women, or *matronae*, would serve dinner for their slaves. [...] Women did this so that at the beginning of the year, they might offer their slaves a model for ready obedience, and so that their slaves might then repay their thank with perfect service [for the remainder of the year].

Again, religion helps reinforce and shape social roles.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. The Roman household provided a home for myriad gods as well as a site for private family rites and worship. Why would such religious conceptions have tended to strengthen the conception of a right to privacy in one’s home?

2. Roman religion is frequently described as contractual. Worshippers stipulate what offerings they will give for specific desired benefits. Inscriptions frequently tell us of vows that have been fulfilled and payments rendered. What do such contracts imply about the nature of the gods? Do such gods derive benefits from these contracts?

The month of March took its name from Mars, god of the fields and god of war. His month was originally the time for both planting and campaigning.
GODS OF THE ROMAN STATE
The government of the city of Rome took on administration first of Italy and then, as the republic expanded, the entire Mediterranean. As the government of a city-state became ill-fitted to an empire, so, too, the religion of the Roman Republic would adapt to govern an empire. The Roman state took divinity seriously and secured help from both native and foreign sources. As Rome grew in territory and population, its pantheon grew accordingly.

**THE PANTHEON OF THE ROMAN CITY-STATE**

- The Romans had countless gods that presided over, assisted with, described, and signified functions. But the Romans also venerated the great gods, whose names are familiar to many today, and early in their recorded history, they had already identified their gods with the gods of the Greeks.

- This process of identifying one’s own gods with those of foreigners was called *interpretatio Romana*, or “Roman translation.” In this way, Greek Aphrodite became Venus. But the process was applied to the gods of other people, too. Phoenician Astarte, Etruscan Turan, and Egyptian Hathor all became Venus.

- Romans translated the names of foreign gods into terms that they could understand, but there was never a complete overlap. Like words from one language to another, aspects of these deities were lost in translation. On the other hand, this process helped Romans understand the gods of other peoples. And even after translation, foreign gods generally retained their own characteristics and forms of worship.

* Despite the identifications we make between Greek and Roman gods, the Roman gods retained their own identities. Roman gods were not identical to their Greek counterparts, and the gods of the Roman state were still less like their Greek counterparts than were the gods of Roman literature, which unkind literary critics have sometimes derided as mere translations of Greek literature into Latin.
As you learned in the previous lecture, Vesta was the goddess of the hearth. Jupiter, however, was the preeminent god of the state. His approval was required before any meeting of a popular assembly or the Senate and before the passage of a law. When generals were on campaign, Jupiter’s approval was required before they could engage in battle or before they could move their camp.

Jupiter was a sky god, the god of lightning and thunder; the Greeks called him Zeus. Juno was his consort and was, among her other duties, goddess of marriage. Minerva, Mars, and Janus were warlike deities. Janus, who had no Greek counterpart, also presided over doorways and transitions. Mars was closely connected with agriculture. Mercury promoted commerce.

**JUPITER AND THE FOUNDING OF ROME**

According to legend, Rome was founded by Romulus and Remus, but there was a backstory that gave these twins divine ancestry. Compared to the Greeks, the Romans were practically bereft of myth, but they did have some legends, and they grafted their foundation myth onto the tales of Troy.

Aeneas, a Trojan warrior, escaped the destruction of Troy and set sail with his father Anchises, his son Iulus (more commonly known as Ascanius), and a group of Trojan survivors. Aeneas brings with him his household gods, including his Penates as well as the Palladium, a wooden statue of Athena (or Minerva) on which the safety of Troy depended.

† In the *Iliad*, the Greek hero, Diomedes, steals the Palladium from the Trojans. The Palladium gets to Italy by various routes in various legends. In the version told by the Roman poet Vergil in his epic the *Aeneid*, which recounts the story in great detail, it is Aeneas who brings the Palladium to Italy.
Aeneas eventually finds his way to Italy, where he marries into a local Latin family. Aeneas marries Lavinia, daughter of Latinus, and in this way, Trojan stock becomes wedded to Latin stock. This explains why Romans would speak Latin but consider themselves Trojan, too. Aeneas then establishes a town, which he names Lavinium after his wife. Aeneas eventually dies and becomes a god called Jupiter Indiges, which means “Jupiter of a Particular Place.”

After Aeneas has become an ancestral spirit, Iulus (or Ascanius) leaves town to establish a town of his own, called Alba Longa, where his descendants stay settled for some time. Many generations later, a descendant named Proca has two sons, Numitor and Amulius. Numitor is the elder and rightful heir, but Amulius drives out his brother, kills Numitor’s male line, and compels Numitor’s daughter, Rhea Silvia, to become a priestess of Vesta. As such, she must remain a virgin and thus cannot produce male offspring, who might challenge Amulius.

While fetching water as part of her priestly duties, however, Rhea Silvia falls asleep in a field. The god Mars passes by, sees her, and rapes her while she is asleep. After she gives birth to the twins Romulus and Remus, Amulius orders that the twins be drowned in the Tiber River, but the executioner instead leaves the babies in a basket in a marsh alongside the river. A passing she-wolf suckles the twins, and the image of a wolf nursing twin babies remains Rome’s symbol to this day.

Just as there were many Zeuses, there were also a variety of Jupiters.
Romulus and Remus grow up without proper adult supervision, gathering around them other rustic types and outlaws. Eventually, they discover their true identity, take vengeance on Amulius, and restore Numitor to his rightful place. Rather than stay in Alba Longa, however, they decide to found a city of their own in the area where they grew up—the hills where they tended flocks of sheep. This is the spot that will become the city of Rome.

But what to call the city? After whom should it be named? Rome after Romulus, or Reme after Remus? Romulus and Remus let the gods decide through augury, or bird-watching. The historian Livy explains how this works:

It was agreed that the gods [...] should choose by augury who should give the new city its name, who should govern it when built. Romulus took the Palatine for his augural quarter, Remus the Aventine. Remus is said to have been the first to receive an augury, from the flight of six vultures.† The omen had already been reported when twice that number appeared to Romulus.

The twins argue over whether the first to see the birds or the one who saw twice as many birds should take precedence, and the two brothers get into a fight. Romulus kills Remus, and the foundation of Rome begins in fratricidal strife. (An omen? Roman history does include many years of civil war.)

Whether or not any of this is remotely true makes no difference. It is how the Romans explained themselves to themselves. And the basic outlines of this story support the organization of Rome’s religion in better-documented historical periods. Romans considered themselves deeply devout and a mixed people, the descendants not just of Trojans and Latins, but also of the many and varied asylum seekers subsequently attracted to the new city of Rome by its founders.

† Jupiter sometimes sends vultures rather than eagles. Roman myth is not the same as Greek myth.
Just as a Roman home kept their private Penates near their hearth, the city of Rome kept the public Penates at the hearth in the Temple of Vesta, which is where they also kept the Palladium, all of which were excluded from the public gaze. The public Penates were also venerated elsewhere.

The myth of Romulus and Remus, who grew up in the countryside as shepherds, highlights another aspect of early Roman society. Rome was not always a large empire or even a large metropolis. Early Roman society was agrarian, and the religion of the city-state reflects these agrarian origins.

The functional deities found in the Roman house—from door hinges, to supervision of marriage, to protection of newborn children—abounded in the fields and farms of the Roman world, too. Some of their names include “Fallow-Field,” “Furrower,” “Grafter,” “Plower,” “Harrower,” “Hoer,” “Plucker,” “Reaper,” “Carrier,” and “Maker”—or, in the original Latin, Vervactor, Imporcitor, Insitor, Obarator, Occator, Sarritor, Subruncinator, Messor, Convector, and Conditor. There was a functional deity for every department, and their very names demonstrate how practical the oldest forms of Roman religion were. And this practical spirit of the farmer carries over into the religion of Rome’s city-state.

The rules for interacting with Jupiter were straightforward and designed to obtain the best results possible. Of the many Jupiters, Rome’s premiere Jupiter was Jupiter Optimus Maximus, “Jupiter Best and Greatest,” but we can see his importance for agriculture in other epithets: Jupiter Lucerius, “Jupiter Lord of Light”; Jupiter Pluvius, “Jupiter Rain-Maker”; Jupiter Fulgurator, “Jupiter Hurler of the Thunderbolt”; and Jupiter Serenator, “Jupiter Calmer of Skies.” Jupiter was the preeminent sky god of the open fields.

In the city, Jupiter Feretrius was the first Jupiter to receive a temple in Rome. Jupiter Capitolinus, “Jupiter of the Capitoline Hill,” otherwise known as Jupiter Optimus Maximus, enjoyed the most magnificent temple, which was rebuilt four times over the centuries.

Jupiter’s Capitoline Temple played a central role in Rome’s political life. Roman consuls began their terms of office before this temple with public sacrifices. The Senate’s first meeting of the year took place in this temple. Generals offered their sacrifices, and they deposited a portion of their spoils in the temple as a dedication, along with records of treaties. The temple thus served as an archive for Rome’s diplomatic relationships. As such, the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus came to symbolize Rome’s authority over at least the world of the Mediterranean, if not the entire world.

**JUNO, A GODDESS OF WOMEN**

Jupiter was not alone on the Capitoline. Juno Moneta received a temple here, too, after the dictator Camillus vowed one in 345 BCE. This was not an uncommon method for Rome to acquire new temples. A general might call on a god or goddess for assistance with the promise of a temple in his or her honor if victorious. The fulfillment of that vow resulted in quite a few temples in Rome. They also served to underscore the connection between Rome’s religiosity and Rome’s victories in war.

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§ There are various explanations as to how Juno received her epithet, Moneta, but it is thought to derive from the Latin verb *monere*, “to warn,” and Juno was credited with offering a useful warning. A mint was established in her temple, and her epithet, *moneta*, came to signify the “money” produced and stored there.
Rome acquired more than spoils when it conquered other people, cities, and territories. Rome also acquired gods. In the 4th century BCE, for example, the Romans were experiencing great difficulties in their attempt to conquer the nearby city of Veii. When they finally did capture Veii in 396 BCE, they asked Juno, the city’s tutelary deity, whether she would prefer to move to Rome. She answered in the affirmative. This was a miracle, her wooden statue was conveyed to Rome, and a temple was built for her on the Aventine Hill. She was known as Juno Regina, or “Queen Juno.” This Juno decided to lend her future aid to the victorious side, but the Roman general had formally invited her before the city’s final capture. Livy reports the invitation:

Under thy leadership, Pythian Apollo, and inspired by thy will, I advance to destroy the city of Veii, and to thee I promise a tithe of its spoils. At the same time, I beseech Queen Juno, that dwellest now in Veii, to come with us to our city—soon to be thy city, too—so that a temple meet for thy majesty may there receive thee.

Romans did not rely on prayers alone, of course. Livy also tells us that “after uttering these prayers, the general set forward overwhelming numbers to assault the town on every side.” Divine support helped, but human effort was still required.

Scholars have classified Rome’s state gods in terms of origin. The gods indigenous to Rome and the Romans include the *manes*, the Lares and Penates, the *genius* and corresponding *juno*, Jupiter, Juno, Vesta, Mars, and Janus. Gods from neighbors in Italy include Diana, Minerva, and Venus. Gods acquired from the Greeks include Apollo, Mercury, and Aesculapius (or Asklepios). The Romans also adopted gods from farther afield, including Isis from Egypt, Syrian gods, and the Persian god Mithras.
Juno, like many other gods, chose Rome, at least according to the Roman historians, and the Romans rewarded her, as well as the other gods, with the vows they fulfilled after their victories. Like vows and prayers, which must follow particular formulas or patterns in order to be effective, so also summoning, or calling out, a goddess from an enemy city was a formal process. The Romans called it *evocatio*.

Once housed at Rome, Juno did more than grant victory to the boys in the field and offer warnings to the men who commanded them. That was just one Juno. Juno had other guises and was preeminently a goddess of women.

Men and women both had an indwelling spirit that animated them. That spirit was called *genius* in men and *juno* in women. Juno was in this respect the animating goddess of every female. She also assisted women under a variety of names. As Juno Jugalis, or “Conjugal Juno,” she protected the marriage bond. As Juno Lucina, or “Shining Juno,” she oversaw childbirth and helped bring children into the light of this world.

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

1. The Romans did not view themselves as indigenous to Italy. How is this reflected in their state religion?

2. One difference between Rome and the city-states of ancient Greece was Rome’s comparatively generous willingness to offer a variety of paths to citizenship (or near equivalents) to conquered peoples. Roman religion also offered a path for the domestication of foreign gods. How might these two practices have worked together?

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We have evidence from inscriptions that the Romans practiced *evocatio* through the late republican period and even later in imperial times.
PRIESTS AND CEREMONIES IN THE ROMAN REPUBLIC
Most Roman priesthoods did not prevent the person who held that priesthood from participating in the normal business of life. Even the position of chief priest, pontifex maximus, was an office that could be held alongside other offices, such as general or consul. This combination of roles—more rule than exception among Rome’s ruling class—begins to reveal the role that religion played in the affairs of the state, whether at home and at peace or at war abroad.

**THE COLLEGE OF PONTIFFS**

○ Priests were organized in colleges, or, in Latin, collegia. Julius Caesar originally joined the college of pontífices (plural of pontifex). Scholars argue over the word’s meaning, but in one reading, it’s someone with “the power to do”—that is, “has the authority to conduct” religious ceremonies. The English derivative is pontiff.

○ Originally, all pontiffs had to be of the patrician order. A patrician was an important status distinction that engendered huge civil strife early in the history of the Roman Republic. Patricians inherited their status along the paternal line, but from the maternal line, too, as patricians were prohibited from marrying plebeians—someone who was not a patrician (in other words, a commoner, or plebe).

Julius Caesar joined Rome’s elite pontifical college at age 27 in 73 BCE. He became pontifex maximus, or chief priest, 10 years later and held that position until his death at age 55 in 44 BCE.

* Plebeians, collectively known as the plebeian order, fought for equal rights in a long struggle called the conflict of the orders.
Patricians married according to a religious ceremony that was valid only for patricians. Patricians also held an early monopoly on political offices, priestly offices, generalships, and the law. Political power, the patrician argument went, could not be shared with plebeians, because only patrician blood was acceptable to the gods and to Jupiter. The origin of patrician status is obscure, but it was already present as a rigid caste distinction when Rome emerged as a republic after the period of legendary kings.

An early victory for plebeians was the first codification of Roman law around 451 BCE, the Law of the Twelve Tables. Before the publication of these laws, plebeians could be arrested and punished by patrician magistrates for violating laws the plebeians did not know existed. Even though they had not been allowed to know the law, ignorance of the law was no excuse. When the laws were finally published, the Law of the Twelve Tables explicitly prohibited intermarriage, thus codifying plebeian inferiority even in their moment of political victory. The conflict continued.

And 150 years later, in 300 BCE, plebeians won access to the college of pontiffs. Rather than simply admit plebeians to the four original spots, the Ogulnian law added another four. Even so, half a century passed before a plebeian actually joined the college. Social change did not come quickly. The college was increased again in 81 BCE from eight to 15.

How did someone join? Originally, the priests decided among themselves and co-opted new members. The choice was later transferred to the people, and pontiffs were elected. The election process represented a compromise that permitted both greater popular participation while preserving the age-old religious traditions of the college.

After the republic falls, the right to select new pontiffs will be transferred from the people to the Senate, but the Senate will ask for, and follow, the advice of the emperor, who is simultaneously pontifex maximus.
These republican pontiffs advised the state when the state had questions; they also advised individuals, especially in the area of family law. The pontiffs controlled adoptions, burial law, proper worship of the ancestral spirits (manes), and the inheritance of a family’s religion (sacra). They supervised the state religion, including the games and state sacrifices. This supervision included directions for performing rituals, the selection of appropriate victims for sacrifices on particular days in specific temples, and the identification of funds to pay the costs of ceremonies. Private sacrifices were subject to their decisions.

They worked by consensus, and the chief pontiff was like the chair of an academic department. The pontifex maximus spoke for his colleagues before the Senate, but his authority over them was far from absolute. They could overrule him. On the other hand, some chief pontiffs, like some chairs, are more persuasive than others.

This college of pontiffs oversaw the religion of the state generally. They did not serve individual gods. More specialized priesthodonts existed for that purpose. Because the pontiffs oversaw family religion and inheritance, their reach had significant impact.

There were also specialized priests dedicated to individual gods, called flamen in the singular and flamines in the plural. A flamen served a single god. The flamen of Jupiter, or the Flamen Dialis, was the most prestigious.

VESTAL PRIESTESSES

The chief pontiff also oversaw the Vestal priestesses, more commonly known as Vestal Virgins, from the Latin Virgines Vestales. The Vestals watched over Rome’s eternal fire at the focus of Rome, Rome’s hearth.

† The word flamen is related etymologically perhaps to the Sanskrit word brahman, which can also mean “priest.”
‡ Other flamines served Mars, Quirinus (who was the god Romulus became), and other gods whose names are obscure. Of 15 traditional flamines, the names of only 12 are certain—a measure of just how obscure some of the gods they served were, and will remain.
Vestals were chosen from among girls who were between the ages of six and 10. Originally, Vestals had to be chosen from among patrician girls whose parents were both still living. Later, freeborn girls of freeborn citizens were also considered. When there was a vacancy, the pontifex maximus named 20 candidates, and one was chosen by lot—which to ancient Romans meant that the gods chose. There were certain exemptions for avoiding service. Fathers could also volunteer their daughters. After her selection, formal guardianship over the girl was transferred from her father to the pontifex maximus through a process called captio, or “capture.”

Vestal service lasted 30 years and required celibacy. After 30 years, Vestals were free to resign their post and marry, although few did. Not only was it considered unlucky to marry a Vestal, but Vestals enjoyed rights that were superior to those of other women. They lodged and lived at public cost. Unlike other women, they had the right to make a will. They could give evidence without taking an oath.
Like consuls, Vestals were attended by an ax-bearing attendant called a lictor. Even consuls, the supreme executives of the state, yielded the right of way to a Vestal, and consuls would lower their fasces—that is, the bundles of rods signifying their authority to enforce their orders with a good beating. It was a capital offense to pass underneath a Vestal’s litter. They were given special seating at dramatic performances and gladiatorial games. Their persons were sacred.

Vestals played an active role, too, in political discussions. For example, when the dictator Sulla was angry at Caesar because he refused to divorce the daughter of Sulla’s political enemy, Vestals interceded on Caesar’s behalf.

In addition to keeping Rome’s eternal fire burning, Vestals prepared sacrificial cakes for, and played a role in, other ceremonies, sacrifices, and public festivals. But their most important job was to preserve the sacred relics, which were considered the *fatale pignus imperii*, a phrase that may be translated as the “pledge of Rome’s sovereignty as ordained by fate.” These included perhaps the Palladium, but this is not certain. Only Vestals had access to these sacred objects, and they kept them in the innermost sanctuary of Vesta.

According to Rome’s religious convictions, Rome’s success and very survival depended on the Vestals. Failure to perform their duties was thus punished severely. Valerius Maximus tells us what happened when a Vestal let the flame go out:

> The chief priest [...] because one night she had failed to guard the eternal fire with sufficient diligence, saw fit to recollect the Vestal to her duty with his whip.

Worse punishments awaited Vestals who violated their vow of chastity. An accused Vestal was brought before the college of pontiffs. If condemned, she was stripped of her office as well as all priestly accoutrements and was basically left to die in an underground pit. The accused lover, meanwhile, was scourged to death in the forum.
An eyewitness account from imperial times helps us understand why the Romans took Vestal chastity so seriously. In a letter, the author Pliny writes:

Now towards the goddess Vesta, now stretching out her hands towards all the other gods, the Vestal shouted many things, but especially the following, over and over again: “Caesar believes that I am unchaste, but, while I offered sacrifices, he conquered, he triumphed!”

Rome’s military success in the field depended not just on military organization and valor, but on the proper worship of the gods at home. Vesta’s worship required chastity. An unchaste Vestal angered the gods and ruptured Rome’s contract with them, which was called the *pax deorum*. When Rome suffered military disasters, the Vestals came under suspicion.

**ROMAN PRIESTHOODS**

One important priesthood was the college of augurs, or *augures*, a college of priests that oversaw divinatory rites to consult the will of the gods in general and to determine the will of Jupiter in particular. Caesar added this priesthood to his portfolio; he put its emblems on his coins.
Important for appeasing the will of angry gods and restoring the *pax deorum* was a group called the *quindecim viri sacris faciundis*, or the “15 men in charge of performing sacred rites.” These men oversaw a collection of books called the Sibyline Oracles, which they consulted when disaster threatened or after it had struck—signifying a rupture in the *pax deorum*—and when requested to do so by the Senate. These priests advised the Senate on what ceremonies to perform, what gods to appease, or even what god and rites to bring to Rome.

The men who served in the fourth great college of male priests were the *epulones*, or “banqueters.” They attended the feasts that took place after sacrifices to Jupiter in particular, but also feasts in honor of the other gods. The meal that took place after a sacrifice was where gods and human beings shared a communal meal and, as such, was a key component of sacrifice. The *epulones* ensured that the banquet was suitable for the gods.

Four colleges were more ancient, but perhaps somewhat less prominent, during the late Roman Republic.

The Fratres Arvales, or Arval Brothers, was a college of 12 priests who offered sacrifices to secure the fertility of the fields. Their primary duty was a three-day festival in honor of Dea Dia, who was perhaps Ceres. Their importance increased dramatically in the imperial period after the first emperor Augustus revived the college as part of his religious reforms. They kept records of what they did and inscribed the details on stone, a large number of which have been excavated. These records allow us to read their protocols, which describe sacrifices and menus, the singing of hymns, and dancing.

Another dancing priesthood was the Salii, or the “Jumpers.” They served Mars and guarded a sacred, oddly shaped shield called an ancile that had fallen from the sky. They cleverly hid this ancile by manufacturing multiple copies; no one could tell which was the original.

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§ This number varies over time. Originally, there were only two, the *duoviri*. 

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Dressed in military garb—including shield, spear, and sword—they brought out the ancilia in March for sacred processions, during which they would stop from time to time to beat the shields, perform an elaborate three-step dance, and sing a hymn in Latin so archaic that it was obscure even to native speakers of classical Latin.

Also archaic and also related to war were the *fetiales*, priests whose job it was to declare war. The Romans claimed that they fought only defensive wars or wars on behalf of friends and allies. Every war the Romans fought was thus, from their point of view, just. The *fetiales* helped keep the wars just.

Before declaring war, the Romans sent the *fetiales* to enemy territory to list their grievances and demand reparations. Carrying sacred herbs gathered on the Capitoline Hill, the chief *fetialis* appealed to Jupiter and stipulated Roman grievances and demands. If, after 30 days, Roman demands remained unmet, the chief *fetialis* declared:

> Hear, Jupiter, and thou, Janus Quirinus, and hear all gods of the skies, and ye, gods of earth, and ye, gods of the underworld; I call you to witness that this people is unjust, and does not make just reparation.

The *fetiales* then returned to Rome. If the Senate voted for war, the *fetiales* again returned to the border, declared war, and hurled a spear into enemy territory.

Perhaps the most ancient college, the Luperci, or “Wolf Brothers,” celebrated the Lupercalia, or “Wolf Fest,” on the 15th of February. The rites began with a meeting in the “Wolf Cave,” called the Lupercal, where Romulus and Remus were allegedly suckled by the she-wolf. They sacrificed goats and dogs and offered cakes made by the Vestals. The Luperci smeared blood from the sacrificial knives onto the foreheads of two young men and wiped them clean again with milk.

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When the Romans began fighting overseas, they set up ground taken from enemy territory and hurled the spear locally.
The young men were supposed to laugh. The Luperci then put on the skins of the slaughtered goats, feasted, and ran around the Palatine Hill, striking any women who crossed their path with strips of skin from the slaughtered victims. Women apparently went out of their way to get in the path of the Luperci, **as the point of the ceremony was to purify and make fertile.**

This most ancient of pagan festivals was also the last major festival to be suppressed in Rome, when, in 494 CE—100 years after the abolition of paganism—Pope Gelasius abolished the Lupercalia and substituted a feast in honor of the purification of the Virgin Mary.

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

1. The important priesthoods of Rome’s public and communal religion were generally part-time jobs held by men who also participated in the political life of the Roman Republic. What benefits and/or disadvantages do you think might have resulted from a system that bound religion and politics so closely together?

2. If you think of Julius Caesar not as a politician or general but instead as chief priest of Rome’s public religion, does this change your perception of him? In what ways? If not, why not?

** Mark Antony, Caesar’s henchman, was notoriously a Lupercus.
Ancient Rome’s divinatory practices intersected with constitutional procedures, politics, and war. The Roman military was a powerful force that conquered and maintained a huge empire both in war and in peace, at home and abroad, on the foundation of auspices. In particular, the religious science of augurs was connected to the laws and constitution of the Roman Republic.

Auspices and Augury

The basis of Roman political authority was a magistrate’s right to bird-watch—or, as Livy put it:

This city was established with auspices. Who does not know that in war or peace at home or on military campaign all our affairs are conducted with auspices?

In reference to the machinery of Roman government, the word *auspicium* had a precise meaning closely related to its root: *auspicium*—from *avis*, meaning “bird,” and *specto*, meaning “to watch,” or, together, “bird-watch.” The procedure is also fundamentally religious. As Cicero put it, birds are “official interpreters and augurs for Jupiter Optimus Maximus.”

Religion does not just intersect with politics; it lies at the foundation of the Roman constitution.

Birds were conveyors of messages. Greeks, Mesopotamians, and Egyptians paid attention to ominous birds, and Romulus and Remus attempted to settle their dispute over the name for their new city through augury. The word *augur* perhaps derives from roots meaning “birdcall.” If something augurs, then one has literally heard the call of the ominous bird one hoped for. Another derivation relates the root *aug*-, a verb that means “to make greater”; birds would thus signal an increase in prosperity.

Military commanders had to consult the will of Jupiter before a contemplated battle or even before moving camp. Permission had to be renewed daily.
At Rome, everyone was free to use auspices; there were both private and public auspices. But by the time of the late republic, most private persons used auspices only for weddings. Public auspices, on the other hand, remained very much in use, as all official business had to be conducted with the consent of Jupiter for the day’s intended business.

There were various ways to consult Jupiter’s will through the use of auspices. Standard procedure was to look for signs *ex avibus* and *ex caelo*, or “from birds” and “from the sky.” A magistrate with the right to use auspices was required to rise between the hours of midnight and dawn. He used a curved wand called the *lituus* to mark out a section of the sky, which would serve as a *templum*, or aerial temple. He demarcated by means of a formula the land from which he would make his observation and then pitched a tent on the consecrated spot.

In the city of Rome, there was a permanent spot consecrated for this purpose on the Capitoline Hill, which was called the *auguraculum*. Birds could deliver messages either by singing or by flying. Birds that could give signs through their voices included the ravens, crows, owls, and hens; eagles and vultures could deliver messages through flight. The person using auspices could specify what kinds of birds should appear or call as well as where the birds should appear in the field of sight or aerial temple that had been designated.

An *auspicium* gave permission for a contemplated action for a day; an *augurium* granted permanent permission. The procedures were similar, and Livy provides a classic description of an augur consulting Jupiter’s will at the inauguration of Rome’s second king, Numa.

Rome had been founded by Romulus, a violent and warlike man, and he had derived his sanction from Jupiter through augury. Rome’s second Numa, by way of contrast, was a peaceful man addicted to religion. Ancient authors credit Numa with instituting Rome’s fundamental religious institutions, including the major priesthoods. And because Numa secured Rome’s relationship with the gods—on whose favor the health and safety of the city and its people depended—Numa was revered, after Romulus, as a second, religious founder of Rome.
The historian Livy describes Numa’s inauguration:

An augur [...] conducted Numa to the citadel and caused him to sit down on a stone, facing the south. The augur seated himself on Numa’s left, having his head covered, and holding his in right hand the crooked staff, [...] which they call a *lituus*. Then, looking out over city and the country beyond, he prayed to the gods, and marked off the heavens by a line from east to west, designating as right the regions to the south, as left those to the north, and fixing in his mind a landmark opposite to him and as far away as the eye could reach; next shifting the *lituus* to his left hand and, laying his right hand on Numa’s head, he prayed, “Father Jupiter, if it is Heaven’s will that this man Numa Pompilius, whose head I am touching, be king in Rome, do thou exhibit to us unmistakable signs within those limits which I have set.” He then specified the auspices which he desired should be sent, and upon their appearance Numa was declared king, and so descended from the augural station.

If an ill-omened sound occurred, it was a *vitium* (from which the English word *vice* derives) and was said to vitiate the procedure, rendering it invalid. The desired signs could also fail to appear; Jupiter did not always grant permission.

Jupiter had more means to communicate than just birds. Thunder and lightning were also signs *ex caelo* and represented the *auspiciium maximum*. For Romans, thunder or lightning represented an emphatic “no.” Even if Jupiter had, for example, granted permission to hold an assembly to vote on legislation, if Jupiter thundered or flashed lightning, this meant that Jupiter had changed his mind: The assembly could no longer continue, and permission would have to be sought on another day.
When Julius Caesar was consul in 59 BCE, his co-consul, Marcus Calpurnius Bibulus, attempted to block Caesar’s legislation through religious objections, first in person and then, after getting a beating at the hands of Caesar’s supporters, from home. Bibulus, locked up at home, claimed to watch the skies for signs.

In this conflict, we see the sort of breakdown of constitutional machinery that would lead to renewed civil war. The consul Bibulus attempted to use religious scruples to block a vote on legislation that enjoyed overwhelming popular support. Bibulus, to be sure, was within his rights. Caesar’s violence removed Bibulus from the forum and confined him to his house. The consul Caesar, who was also simultaneously Rome’s chief pontiff, could thus argue that Bibulus’s religious objections were invalid because Bibulus failed to state his objections in person. Caesar had a point, too, but only after his use of unconstitutional violence.

Constitutions work when those who use them want them to work. Caesar and Bibulus were colleagues incapable of compromise, but Rome’s collegial form of government—here, co-consuls—required compromise, consensus, and a respect for the rules. Abuse of the religious rules combined with political intransigence and physical violence led to civil war and eventually the end of the republic, and this had massive religious consequences.

We have, somewhat ironically, in the example of Caesar—darling of the common people, a patrician—and the deeply unpopular and archconservative Bibulus—a plebeian—a nice demonstration that although these status markers still existed, they were no longer predictive of political allegiances.
The right of plebeians to stand for the consulship had been hard won, and much of the conflict of the orders had revolved around the right to use auspices. Would Jupiter accept inquiries from someone who was not patrician?

Religion protected patrician privilege, and the plebeians demanded access. Progress was slow, but it was complete, and by Caesar’s day, we witness the plebeian but archconservative Bibulus attempt to make use of patrician religious traditions against a patrician politician’s popular legislation that aimed to grant land to veterans.

**THE SIBYLLINE ORACLES**

Portents of the future feature prominently in any history of Rome, and they loomed large in ancient religious imagination. Auspices represent signs, which an inquirer has requested. They may thus be classed as *omnia impetrativa*, “requested signs.” There was also a class of signs called *omen oblativa*, “signs that have simply occurred.” Individuals and magistrates may accept or reject omens that present themselves, or they may seek to avert an omen or redirect it.

The state also tracked major portents—the Romans called them *prodigia*, or “prodigies.” Romans kept records and maintained a college of priests, the *quindecim viri sacris faciundis*—that is, the “15 men in charge of arranging religious rites”—to figure out what a prodigy might mean and what the state might do about it. This board varied in number; like all bureaucracies, this number increased over time.

The Christian author Lactantius tells us how Rome obtained the Sibylline Oracles, which these priests used as their guidebook. A female prophet called a Sibyl presented herself to the legendary king Tarquinius Priscus. She offered to sell him nine books of prophecy. The king thought the price was too high, so he refused. She left and burned three of the books. Then, she came back with six books and offered six books for the price of nine. Again, the king refused. The Sibyl left and burned three more books, only to return and ask again for the full price of nine books.
At this point, Tarquinius consulted the augurs, who advised him to pay full price for the three remaining books, so he did. The books were stored in the Temple of Jupiter, and a two-man board (the duoviri) was appointed to consult them. This later became a 10-man board, decemviri—in order to make spots for plebeians—and then a 15-man board, the quindecimviri sacris faciundis. Whatever their number, they consulted the books only when directed to by the Senate. The quindecimviri only advised; they did not decide. The Senate would solicit, consider, debate, and ultimately decide how to proceed.

What sorts of occurrences were concerning enough that the Senate would want a board of experts to propose religious solutions? A list of prodigies from the year 461 BCE may serve as a typical example. Livy writes:

This year the heavens were seen to blaze, and the earth was shaken with a prodigious quake. That a cow had spoken a thing which had found no credence the year before was now believed. Among other portents there was even a rain of flesh, which is said to have been intercepted by vast numbers of birds flying round in the midst of it; what fell to the ground lay scattered about for several days, but without making any stench.

Prodigies are unusual phenomena. Some, like earthquakes or plagues, are, from our perspective, natural. But why would an earthquake or plague seem natural to people who do not know about plate tectonics? The earth appears to be solid and unmovable, but suddenly it shakes violently, knocking over buildings. That’s strange. A rain of flesh or a talking cow, on the other hand, even from our perspective, is both unusual and unnatural.

For this reason, yearly records of prodigies were kept in the archives of the chief pontiff, and these prodigies were correlated with contemporary political events. What happened the year it rained stones rather than water? (Occasionally, sand blew in from the Sahara.) The Romans wrote these things down, and then the next time it rained stones, Romans could
check the records and be prepared for similar events. Responses to prodigies were determined by discussion, debate, and consensus. If a remedy proved ineffective, they tried again.

The duoviri, decemviri, and later quindecimviri were responsible for suggesting not just the introduction of new gods but also new forms of worship. The Sibylline Books* were almost certainly in Greek, not Latin, and the gods introduced at their recommendation include such Greek deities as Apollo, Latona, Mater Magna (the “Great Mother,” or Cybele), and Aesculapius, all of whom kept their Greek names. Greek gods were also brought in under Latin names: Artemis as Diana, Demeter as Ceres, Persephone as Proserpina, and Herakles as Hercules. Prodigies in the form of military defeats, plagues, and starvation motivated such imports. Aesculapius was a healing god, Ceres was goddess of grain, and Mater Magna helped expel Hannibal from Italy.

We have in the auspices and the Sibylline Oracles two rather different approaches to the role of religion in statecraft. On the one hand, in augury and the use of auspices to obtain Jupiter’s approval, we see an aspect of ancient Roman religion that was characteristically Roman and a much more developed science than the augury practiced in Greece. On the other hand, when we consider the Sibylline Books and the board of priests of various number constituted for their consultation, we discover, despite the Romans’ self-proclaimed conservatism, an openness and flexibility that accommodates the introduction of new gods and new rituals, either to appease angry gods or to reassure troubled citizens in times of crisis—or both.

* The Sibylline Books were supposed to be kept secret, but we do possess one document that purports to be an excerpt from them. It is preserved in a work entitled On Miracles, composed by Phlegon of Tralles, who was a Greek freedman of the emperor Hadrian. The authenticity of the document is highly dubious.
The Sibylline Oracles also recommended the introduction of new rituals, which included the festival games, or *ludi*, associated with individual gods. These games included dramatic performances, *scenici*, and chariot races, *circenses*. These *circenses*, or circuses, provided entertainment and distraction, too, in troubled times.

In 399 BCE, in response to a plague, the *lectisternium* was introduced on the recommendation of the Sibylline Books. A *lectisternium* was a banquet for the gods, during which the gods were brought out from their temples onto the streets, where they reclined on couches and received food offerings from the people, who likewise feasted with their gods.

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

1. Among ancient divinatory practices, Rome developed augury and the use of auspices by magistrates into a science that was used both politically at home and militarily abroad. What religious efficiencies and advantages might this system have offered leading politicians and generals?

2. In times of stress, challenge, and disaster, the Roman state had recourse to consultation of the Sibylline Oracles. In what ways do you think that the state’s subsequent performance of extraordinary religious rites might have helped relieve public anxieties?
ROME'S REACTIONS TO FOREIGN RELIGIONS
After a review of the many gods who over the centuries found a home at Rome, one might think that Rome was open to all gods, all the time. Closer examination, however, reveals that the state had a range of responses, from official adoption, to occasional consultation, to turning a blind eye, to open hostility and active persecution.

**THE INTERPRETATION OF PORTENTS AND SIGNS**

● The haruspices, or soothsayers, are often classed among the priests of Rome, but they had no official status with the Roman state on a level akin to pontiffs, augurs, *quindecimviri* for sacred rites, or Vestals. A haruspex was trained in extispicy, or reading the entrails of sacrificial victims, especially their livers. This was an art in which ancient Mesopotamians excelled.

● Closer to Rome, the Etruscans, who inhabited the area now called Tuscany in Italy, also excelled in this skill. The Etruscans excelled in both the reading of entrails and the interpretation of thunder and lightning. Rome recognized the Etruscans’ skills in these arts and consulted them, but Rome did not make them or their art an official part of the state religion. Haruspices were outside vendors.
Haruspices were a class of foreigners—Etruscans—whose skills were deemed useful, and the state indeed employed haruspices without actually incorporating them officially into the state’s divinatory regime. Over the course of Roman history, the Senate made frequent use of the skills of haruspices, and historians and orators record the responses from the haruspices and Sibylline Books as if they were on the same level. It is thus no wonder that the haruspices often seem part and parcel of traditional Roman religion—and they were in many respects, but they were never fully integrated.

The haruspices were criticized from time to time as quacks. And after the age of Caesar—after the transition from republic to monarchy—the arts of the haruspices fell into neglect, and we see this most clearly when the emperor Claudius* seeks to preserve their science before it slips away. Tacitus writes:

Claudius brought before the Senate the subject of establishing the college of “haruspices,” so that, as he said, “the oldest of Italian sciences might not be lost through negligence.” [...] The nobles of Etruria, whether of their own accord or at the instigation of the Roman Senate, had retained this science, making it the inheritance of distinct families. It was now less zealously studied through the general indifference to all sound learning and to the growth of foreign superstitions.

In their heyday, haruspices gave their advice to the Senate of the republic, where senators freely and openly debated both the responses they received from the priests and the proposals made by their peers for actions going forward. The responses of the haruspices were religiously relevant in a republic, because they were points for discussion, not decrees to be obeyed. Under the monarchy of the Caesars, however, what would be the point? Any senatorial debate would try to anticipate or elicit the opinion of the emperor, and any vote would simply ratify the opinion of the emperor, whose religious and legal authority was supreme.

* Claudius was deeply interested in all things Etruscan; he even wrote a history of the Etruscans (unfortunately now lost) and was skilled in Etruscan lore.
And at this intersection of religion and politics, we can perhaps glimpse dimly the utility of divination among a free people. The difficulty of interpreting portents and signs—even with the recommendations of experts—provides a forum for discussion and debate that fosters creative approaches to a range of possible solutions, from among which the group finds its way toward consensus.

Unofficial groups can, however, also reach a consensus that may be opposed to the consensus of the group in charge, and the Roman state had always guarded against this possibility. There was no such thing as freedom of association in Rome.

Although the state did not care about religious doctrine, it did expect citizens to care for their family religion and their ancestral spirits. Citizens were expected to participate in public festivals and ceremonies, and one imagines that there was a fair amount of social pressure. One also imagines that the state religion provided so many diverse opportunities for religious worship that there would hardly be a need for groups to import their own forms of religion.

But Rome was big. It attracted foreigners as well as citizens who were not native Romans or Italians. And there were also those who were not satisfied with their lot in life. And throughout Roman history, there was social unrest—for many reasons, including slavery, sexism, war, poverty, debt, exploitation, and religion.

THE CULT OF BACCHUS

From Greece, worship of Dionysus under the name of Bacchus spread to Italy. Bacchus was also known at Rome as Liber Pater, or the “Free Father.” The gift of Bacchus can set one free from cares, concerns, and social restraints.
According to Livy, in 186 BCE, the consul Postumius received a report from a courtesan about a new form of religious worship. When the courtesan’s teenage lover refused to have sex with her, she learned that he was preparing himself for initiation to the cult of Bacchus. She warned him not to go through with his plan and eventually went to the consul, who found her report credible. The consul in turn consulted the Senate. This is how Livy presents the backstory:

A nameless Greek came first to Etruria, possessed of none of those many arts which the Greek people, supreme as it is in learning, brought to us in numbers for the cultivation of mind and body, but a dabbler in sacrifices and a fortune-teller; nor was he one who, by frankly disclosing his creed and publicly proclaiming both his profession and his system, filled minds with error, but a priest of secret rites performed by night.

Livy points to a double origin—doubly foreign. We also see that although sacrifice and divination serve as the bedrock of the state religion, these same practices are suspect when conducted in secret and at night. We also learn that worshippers meet in mixed groups and drink, and no sexual union is off-limits. This leads to further vice. Livy explains:

There was not one form of vice alone, the promiscuous matings of free men and women, but perjured witnesses, forged seals and wills and evidence, all issued from this same workshop: likewise poisonings and secret murders, so that at times not even the bodies were found for burial.

The citizens—who choose freely to come together to drink and possibly engage in consensual sexual relations—commit crimes according to Roman thinking, and their activities violate religious as well as political norms and values.

† Prostitution was legal at Rome, and it was acceptable for teenage boys to have courtesans, or slave sex partners. Chaste behavior was imposed only on respectable female citizens so that they could bear legitimate children to their husbands for religious reasons.
When the courtesan delivers her report to the consul, further details emerge. As reported by Livy:

[N]o form of crime, no sort of wrongdoing, was left untried. [...] If any of them were disinclined to endure abuse or reluctant to commit crime, they were sacrificed as victims. To consider nothing wrong [...] was the highest form of religious devotion among them. Men, as if insane, with fanatical tossings of their bodies, would utter prophecies. Matrons in the dress of Bacchantes, with disheveled hair and carrying blazing torches, would run down to the Tiber, and plunging their torches in the water, [...] would bring them out still burning.

What the courtesan says next is truly alarming:

Their number [...] was very great, almost constituting a second state; among them were certain men and women of high rank. Within the last two years it had been ordained that no one beyond the age of twenty years should be initiated: boys of a young age were sought, because they were more susceptible to vice and corruption.

The worshippers of Bacchus posed a threat to morals, laws, and the state. Romans did not enjoy the right to assembly. Indeed, even a Roman magistrate first had to use his auspices to ask Jupiter for permission before calling an assembly. This religious route to sanction their assembly was unavailable to the Bacchants. Could they have justified their meeting by appeal to their own religion? Yes, but this was not a state-sanctioned religion. Therefore, their assembly was illegal.

Another important constitutional point is that Roman assemblies could meet only after daybreak and had to end before sunset. State business could not be conducted at night. The assemblies of the Bacchants contravene Roman practice in this respect, too.

Why is freedom of assembly so dangerous? When people gather in groups, they can discuss their common grievances and take common action. If the aggrieved outnumber those whom they perceive as their
Lectures, the many can, from time to time, dispossess the few. This is a danger against which any manifestly unjust social system must be vigilant. And the Roman state was vigilant to protect not just itself but also the gods of the state, who the consul alleges “were outraged that their own divinity was being polluted by acts of crimes and lust.”

Livy’s consul alleges that “nothing is more deceptive in appearance than a false religion,” as “the authority of the gods is put forward as a defense for crime.” But Rome has a defense in the state religion: “the edicts of the pontiff, decrees of the Senate, and finally responses of the haruspices.” For this reason, the Roman magistrates forbid the introduction of foreign cults, exclude dabblers in sacrifices and fortune-tellers from the Forum, the Circus, and the City; they search out and burn books of prophecies, and they annul every system of sacrifice except that performed in the Roman way.

The consul concludes with decrees of the Senate for the suppression of the Bacchanalia and the punishment of those who had been initiated. This unleashes a panic not only in Rome but throughout Italy. According to Livy, more than 7,000 people were involved in the conspiracy, and he names two plebeians and non-Roman Etruscans as the ringleaders. The Roman state protected its religion—and was protected by it.

Celtic versus German Religion

Because religion was a strategic asset, Romans took a practical interest in the religions of those they conquered. We see this especially clearly in the writings of Julius Caesar, who served in Gaul as supreme commander while simultaneously serving as Rome’s pontifex maximus.

† The suppression of the Bacchanalia would be repeated with other groups. There is some evidence, for example, that during the reign of Tiberius, some 4,000 Jews were banished to Sardinia for proselytizing.
At the beginning of Caesar’s first five-year proconsulship, his province included northern Italy and what is now Provence in southern France. Nine years later, he had reduced the rest of France as well as parts of the Netherlands and Germany to a Roman province. Caesar took a logistical interest in the religious practices of the natives and provides a short account of Celtic in comparison with German religion.

Caesar first reviews the religion of the Gauls and describes in some detail the role that the priestly class plays in their society. These are the Druids, and they conduct all major religious ceremonies and sacrifices and serve also as judges over both property law and criminal law.

Caesar presents a generally favorable portrait of Celtic religion, including their belief in the transmigration of the soul after death and their respect for the gods. Caesar also discusses Gallic burial practices and social organization, and the reader comes to see the Gallic civilization on par with Roman civilization. But then Caesar turns to his summary in his matter-of-fact style:

The nation of all the Gauls is extremely devoted to religious rites; and on that account those who are troubled with unusually severe diseases, and those who are engaged in battles and dangers, either sacrifice human beings as victims, or vow that they will sacrifice them, and employ the Druids as the performers of those sacrifices; because they think that unless the life of a human being is offered for the life of a human being, the mind of the immortal gods cannot be rendered propitious, and they have sacrifices of that kind ordained for national purposes.

It turns out that Caesar’s portrait is not positive, and he provides some justification perhaps for a war that many in Rome considered illegal. Caesar, the humanitarian, would not practice human sacrifice.
After this review of Celtic religion, Caesar turns to the Germans:

The German way of life is very different. They have no druids to preside over matters related to the divine, and they do not have much enthusiasm for sacrifices.

This marks the Germans as different not only from Gauls, but also from Romans, who, like Gauls, had a priesthood and displayed enthusiasm for sacrifices, just not human sacrifices. Caesar goes on famously to state that the Germans count as gods only those phenomena that they can perceive and by whose powers they are plainly helped: the Sun, Fire, and Moon; others they do not know even from hearsay.

Whereas Celts are like Romans—at least Gauls know, for example, about the god Mercury—the Germans are decidedly not. The Germans can only worship what they can see.

The Romans gave up the attempt to conquer Germany; German religion would not be a concern for Rome. Gaul, on the other hand, was Romanized, but their religion occasionally caught the notice of Roman authorities.

Polytheism could accommodate many gods, but it could not accommodate people who wanted to assemble on their own to worship their gods in their own way without state supervision. Rome’s gods approved Rome’s laws, morals, and social organization. The gods of others promoted non-Roman ways of life. The tolerance of Roman magistrates and their gods had limits.
The emperor Claudius, who was born in Gaul, was deeply interested in religion. Not only did he wish to revive the science of haruspicy, but he paid attention to portents, wanted to bring the Eleusinian mysteries of Greece to Rome, and persecuted religions that he did not approve of. He expelled astrologers from Italy, suppressed Christians, and persecuted Druids.

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

1. Rome did not hesitate to adopt and incorporate what was useful in foreign religions for its own purposes. Why do you think Rome kept haruspicy at arm’s length, despite their frequent use of Etruscan experts in this art?

2. In what ways might unofficial and unsanctioned religious rites offer a means to those who are politically dissatisfied to act on their grievances? Did Rome have a legitimate security interest in suppressing such rites?
THE ROMAN CALENDAR AND SACRED DAYS
The Roman Calendar and Sacred Days

Time has meaning because we bestow meaning upon it, and particular days can have special meaning because human beings and their gods give those days special meanings. Examples include Christmas Eve and the Fourth of July. The Romans similarly bestowed special meanings on particular days. For example, the ides of October were sacred, as were the ides of every month, to Jupiter. The ides of a month were in the middle, either the 13th or the 15th, depending on the month. Similarly, the first day of the month, which the Romans called the kalends, were sacred to Juno. Because the 15th of October was sacred to Jupiter, there was a feast on this day for Jupiter.

Roman Influences on Our Calendar

Much of the Roman calendar seems familiar to us. We still use the Roman names for the months:

- **January**, named for Janus, the two-faced god of the doorway, who looks both ways;
- **February**, from *frebruare*, “to purify and expiate”—hence *februa*, the purifications that took place in that month;
- **March**, dedicated to Mars, god of the fields, both agricultural and military;
- **April**, from *aperire*, “to open,” when buds blossom;
- **May**, after Maia, a rustic goddess of nature;
- **June**, after the goddess Juno;
- **July**, after the god Julius, who dwelled on earth as a general, politician, and priest;
- **August**, after the god Augustus, the divine Julius’s son, who dwelled on earth as monarch of the Roman Empire;
- **September**, from *septem*, the Latin word for “seven”;
- **October**, from *octo*, the Latin word for “eight”;
- **November**, from *novem*, the Latin word for “nine”; and
- **December**, from *decem*, the Latin word for “ten.”
We call the eighth, ninth, 10th, 11th, and 12th months of the year by numbers that are manifestly two too few because the Romans originally began the year on March 1st. Thus, these ordinal numbers were once correct.

Moreover, according to what the Romans tell us, the year originally had 10, not 12, months. This is the so-called year of Romulus. Romulus allegedly established a 10-month calendar in line with phases of the moon. There were six months of 30 days and four months of 31 days for a total of 304 days.

The second king, Numa, was credited with fixing this defective scheme by inserting two months. He prefixed January to March, and February was put after December until a subsequent reform put February in its current spot. Numa’s year was a lunar year of 354 days, plus one extra day, to bring the sum to 355 days, an odd—and thus lucky—number, with four months of 31 days, seven of 29 days, and one of 28 days. An intercalary month of 22 or 23 could be inserted every other year to bring the lunar calendar back in line with the solar year.

The kalends (the first day of the month, sacred to Juno) were also the days on which the priest was to “call,” calare, the new moon. The nones, which fell on the ninth, was the day the rex sacrorum, or king of sacrifices, announced the festival days. Festivals in Rome were either fixed like Independence Day in the United States or moveable, depending on calendrical calculations, such as Easter or Passover.

The ides, in the middle of the month, corresponded with the full moon, when the earth receives maximum illumination, and this may be the reason why they were sacred to the greatest god of the bright sky, Jupiter.
We share months with the Romans, but not weeks. The Romans used an eight-day week signified by letters running from A to H. Each day received an additional letter: C, F, N, NP, or EN. Some days were also marked as sacred holidays.

Holidays were dedicated to the gods as *dies festi*. Such days included public sacrifices, banquets, games, and rest from work (*feriae*). In addition to fixed and moveable feasts, they could also be ordered for emergencies, prodigies, and supplications of thanks.

Workdays were *dies profesti*, or “days before holidays.” These workdays were further classified. Days on which cases could be heard in court were labeled with an F as *dies fasti*. Days on which an assembly could be called were labeled with a C as *dies comitiales*. Days on which court cases could not be heard were *dies nefasti* and were marked with NP if they were inappropriate for court because they were public holidays or N if they were unlucky. Days on which the Romans had suffered military defeat, for example, were considered ill-omened from the event.

*Fasti* is the word that the Romans generally used for *calendar*, even though they also invented the word *calendarium*. 
“Days after,” *dies postridiani*, were the days after the kalends, nones, or ides. Rome continually had bad luck on those days, so religious, military, and political activity was forbidden. *Dies fissi* were days that were split in character: The morning was permissible for court, business, and the like, but the afternoon was not. They were marked with EN.

The 15th of June had a special mark of its own, QSTDF, which represents the Latin phrase *quando stercus delatum fas*, or “after the excrement has been carried out, the day is religiously permissible for other business.”

The college of pontiffs was responsible for keeping track of the days, holidays, months, and years. These keepers of the calendar, however, had, by historical times, failed miserably. The Roman calendar was seldom in synch even with the moon, let alone the seasons.†

There were reasons for this failure. Religion intersected with politics when it came to the calendar as well, and knowing what days courts can hear cases and what days assemblies can be called is a source of power, especially when your opponents do not.

Knowledge of significant dates was originally a patrician monopoly, thus putting the plebeians at a disadvantage, until a freedman by the name of Gnaius Flavius published the calendar in 304 BCE so that, as Livy tells us, “people would know on what days they could lodge their legal cases.” Knowledge of the law as well as the days when one could pursue justice were hard-won rights.

If, then, we add up all the days marked with F and C, there were about 239 days available for legal and political business. This is about 10 workweek days fewer than in the US, where, subtracting federal holidays, there are about 250.

† To give you a sense of how far off the calendar had become, in his *Commentaries on the Civil War*, Caesar tells us that he set sail for Greece in January, and sometime later that month, he informs us that “winter was approaching.” Even in the Mediterranean, winter is not approaching in January—it has already settled in.
Publication of the calendar, however, did not remove the calendar from pontifical control. The pontiffs were still in charge of inserting intercalary months, weeks, or days. This right could prolong the magistrates’ terms or shorten their terms. Political considerations continued to interfere with more rational organization of time until Julius Caesar fixed the calendar in 46 BCE in his dual capacity as pontifex maximus (chief pontiff) and dictator.‡

The year 46 BCE was 445 days long, which is what was required to put the seasons back on track. Caesar’s critics called it the “year of confusion,” but it was actually the year that ended confusion. Indeed, with minor adjustments by Pope Gregory, we still use the Julian calendar today.

RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES

But Caesar faced obstacles that even a dictator who was chief pontiff could not surmount: the religious scruples of the Roman people.

The shortest day of the year in 46 BCE was December 24th. Caesar wanted to begin the new year the next day, which would have made January 1st the first day after the winter solstice. That would have been logical. Unfortunately for Caesar and logic, religious scruples required beginning the new year on the day of the new moon. This meant a delay, and we live with that delay—occasioned by pagan religious scruples—to this day.

Caesar discussed calendrical matters with local astronomical experts.

‡ In the year of his assassination, Caesar had been named dictator perpetuus, essentially meaning “dictator with no expiration date.”
Caesar’s year was 11 minutes 12 seconds too long, and by 1582, his calendar no longer aligned well with the seasons, so Pope Gregory XIII, pontifex maximus in Rome (the office still exists), decreed that the 4th of October 1582 would be followed by the 15th of October 1582.

Because of certain parallels with Christmas celebrations, Rome’s pagan Saturnalia, held originally in honor of the agricultural deity Saturn, is one of the better-known Roman holidays. The public and religious holiday took place on December 17th and included a sacrifice and public feast. This public portion was followed by three or more days of celebration at home that included the sacrifice and consumption of a suckling pig.

Suetonius tells us that the emperor liked to distribute clothes, gold and silver; sometimes coins of all sorts, even of the ancient kings of Rome and of foreign nations; sometimes nothing but towels, sponges, rakes, and tweezers, and other things of that kind, with tickets on them, which were enigmatical, and had a double meaning.

There was gift giving; small clay statues were especially popular. And there were games, such as dice. A bit of gambling was allowed. There was also role reversal at the Saturnalia, where slaves put on their masters’ clothes and were granted free speech. According to Macrobius, the god Saturn’s reign is said to have been a time of great happiness, both on account of the universal plenty that then prevailed and because as yet there was no division into slave and free—as one may gather from the complete license enjoyed by slaves at the Saturnalia.

The Saturnalia was replaced eventually by Christmas, but note that in the Julian calendar, December 25th was the day following the shortest day of the year. In 275 CE, the emperor Aurelian established this date as the cult of the unconquered sun, or sol in Latin, presumably because this was the day on which the sun began to recover its solar power.
Other festivals were primarily public and included games, or *ludi*, which were generally either *scaenici* or *circenses*. *Ludi scaenici* were “scenic”—that is, dramatic performances on stages erected for the event, or circus games. *Ludi circenses* were chariot races that took place on a circular racetrack, hence *circus*.

The games in honor of the Mater Magna, Cybele, is a “scenic” example. These were the Megalesia, or Ludi Megalenses, celebrated in April, beginning on the 4th and lasting six days, celebrated in honor of the goddess who had been brought to Rome in 203 BCE during the Second Punic War.

Cicero called the Megalensian games “chaste, solemn, and holy.” Perhaps this is why they seem eventually to have added chariot races. And the remains of the *circus maximus*, or great racecourse, are still visible and still accessible in Rome. The *circus maximus* is now a park and a popular location for concerts. When Rome was pagan, however, the Ludi Romani, or Roman Games, would begin with a parade.

Dionysius of Halicarnassus provides a vivid description. Before the games begin, “the principal magistrates conduct a procession in honor of the gods from the Capitol through the Forum to the Circus Maximus.” Young men follow the magistrates, and charioteers driving their horses come next, followed by contestants in the wrestling matches, whose “whole bodies are naked except their loins.”

These contestants are followed by numerous groups of dancers, flute players, and lyre players. After the dancers and musicians, there followed “persons who carried the censers in which perfumes and frankincense were burned along the whole route of the procession” and also those “who carried vessels made of silver and gold, both those that were sacred to the gods and those that belonged to the state.”

Last of all in the procession came

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§ We still possess several comedies by Terence that were produced at the Megalensian games, including a fairly tame romantic comedy called *Andria*, performed in 166 BCE.
the images of the gods, borne on men’s shoulders. [...] These were the statues not only of Jupiter, Juno, Minerva, Neptune, [...] but also statues of gods still more ancient [...] namely, Saturn, Ops, Themis, Latona, the Parcae, Mnemosyne, [...] Proserpina, Lucina, the Nymphs, the Muses, the Seasons, the Graces, Liber, and the demigods [...] such as Hercules, Aesculapius, Castor and Pollux, Helen, Pan, and countless others.

After the parade, the consuls, priests, and their assistants begin a massive sacrifice. All this happens before the chariot racing and wrestling. Other festivals had to add circuses to compete.

Gladiatorial games were first held in 264 BCE by Marcus and Decimus Brutus at the funeral of their father. These were *ludi funebres*, “funeral games.” Such games were confined first to the funerals of important public figures but later were offered also for prominent women and at private funerals when the family could afford it.
Roman politicians hoping to curry favor with the voters began adding gladiatorial combats to public festivals, too. We see a sort of progression from romantic comedies to chariot racing and wrestling matches to fights to the death, all in the name of religion. Capital punishment for the slaves and lower classes included condemnation to public festivals. Gladiatorial school served as an alternative to condemnation to the mines. The Romans integrated their criminal justice system as well as their politics with the cycle of religious festivals.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Electrical lighting has transformed much of night into additional daytime, and our expectations for goods and services 24/7 have largely erased distinctions between workdays and holidays. Do some days nevertheless feel different? Does sacred time still exist in our calendar? Why or why not? How might Rome’s calendar have shaped what it felt like to be Roman?

2. Horse racing and gladiatorial games were associated with Rome’s religious calendar. Similarly, Greek athletic contests, including those in honor of Zeus at Olympus, were key features of religious festivals. What emotional benefits might such events have provided? Modern sports are, in comparison, secular. Are there ways in which modern sports might nevertheless satisfy communal emotional needs? Are such emotional needs in any sense religious?
JULIUS CAESAR: A TURNING POINT IN ROMAN RELIGION
The religious career of Julius Caesar marked a turning point in the history of Roman religion in particular, but also Mediterranean paganism more generally. Rome’s hegemony over the civilized parts of Europe, North Africa, and the Mediterranean Near East meant that what happened in Roman religion had a profound and lasting impact on pagan religions across the Roman empire.

CAESAR’S POLITICAL WORLD

Caesar was born in 100 BCE, when Rome was already some three decades into a civil war that was marked in 133 BCE by the attempt of Tiberius Sempronius Gracchus, as tribune of the plebeians, to alleviate social conditions in Italy by enacting legislation to distribute land to the poor and landless. This was the *ager publicus*, which belonged to the state but was occupied by the rich, who ran huge estates.

These estate holders were not happy, and Tiberius was clubbed to death by a mob of senators led by Tiberius’s own cousin, Publius Cornelius Scipio Nasica, the newly installed *pontifex maximus*. Tiberius Gracchus’s brother Gaius was subsequently elected to the same office and tried to continue the unfinished work of his brother’s tribunate. When the Senate came for Gaius, he fled to the sacred grove of the Furies, where his attendant, the public slave Philocrates, slew him and then killed himself.

The Gracchi brothers attempted to use the political office of tribune of the plebs, or tribune of the plebeians, to pass their legislation. Recall the use of auspices by the consuls, which was originally a purely patrician office. Plebeian institutions were also interconnected with religious institutions, although not the same ones as the originally patrician offices.
Before plebeians gained access to priesthoods and the consulship—and thus the right to use auspices—they had fought for the codification of Roman law. Because the patricians had originally resisted admitting them to the consulship and full religious equality, the patricians had earlier in Roman history conceded to plebeians the right of electing their own representatives. These representatives were the tribunes of the plebs, who could protect plebeians from abuse at the hands of patrician magistrates. To protect tribunes, their persons were made sacred during their time in office, which in effect rendered them, both legally and religiously, inviolable.

Patrician magistrates could scourge and kill ordinary people, but tribunes were exempt from such treatment. Anyone who killed a person who mistreated a tribune would not be guilty of murder, and the person who mistreated the tribune’s property would be consecrated to the goddess Ceres. These were strong protections, guaranteed by religion, but not, at least at first, the use of auspices.

Originally two in number, there were eventually 10 tribunes, and although the first tribunes acted merely as protectors of the accused, thus affording them a right to a judicial hearing rather than summary punishment at the hands of magistrates with executive authority, their powers gradually grew. Tribunician authority, or tribunicia potestas, came gradually to include the right to convoke assemblies of the plebeians—without the patricians—and to propose legislation, which, if passed, became plebiscite, or “judgments of the people,” which were binding on the whole people, not just on plebeians.

Rome thus eventually had three major sources for legislation: consular proposals before assemblies that included both patricians and plebeians, tribunician plebiscites from assemblies that included only plebeians, and senatorial decrees called senatusconsulta.

In Caesar, politics and religion were always united.
By Caesar’s time, *tribunicia potestas* included both positive and negative powers. They enjoyed the right to use auspices, convene assemblies, propose legislation, and attend the Senate as well as veto both laws proposed by consuls and laws concluded by the Senate. Tribunes acquired the right to intercede on behalf of, and thus protect, as well as pass laws binding on both patricians and plebeians. On the other hand, even after plebeians gained access to almost all offices that had once been the exclusive prerogative of patricians, patricians were forever excluded from the tribunate.

Caesar was born a patrician. He was thus excluded by the accident of descent from the tribunate, an office with tremendous powers and possibilities, which Caesar in his later religious capacity as chief pontiff would, with the help of a political ally, learn to exploit, as would Roman emperors, all of whom were patrician.

Essentially, the office of tribune of the plebs resulted from class struggle, and the Gracchi brothers put the powers of that office to use in an effort to redistribute property. After their assassinations, struggles between factions that aimed to promote—or at least purported to promote—the interests of the common people versus those that aimed to preserve the privileges of the ruling class continued and frequently erupted in violence.

Those who relied on appeals to the common people and their institutions were called *populares*, Latin for “men of the people.” Those who relied on appeals to tradition and the authority of the Senate called themselves the *optimates*, Latin for “best people.”

This was the political world into which Caesar was born, and, despite his birth into a patrician family, his family connections brought him into the faction of the *populares.*

Caesar’s father died suddenly when Caesar was 15 or 16, which made the young man a *pater familias*, the legal head of his household.
Caesar’s aunt’s husband was Marius*, a highly successful plebeian general who was elected to the consulship seven times as one of the *populares*. Marius and his political allies fought a bitter civil war against Sulla, a patrician who fought for the traditional rights, powers, and privileges of the ruling class, or *optimates*.

Marius was a successful general who transformed the army. He enlisted *proletarii*, whose poverty had previously exempted them from military service, and paid them not just with plunder from victorious campaigns, but also with retirement packages in the form of land in colonies. As a result of this system, soldiers became increasingly loyal to their generals, who rewarded them, rather than to the state, who sent them into war. War also became popular with the poor as a way out of poverty.

Caesar, who waged a war of aggression in Gaul as well as successful civil war against the Senate, followed in the pattern established by Marius. But before Caesar could accomplish this, he had to escape Sulla.

Marius died on January 13th, 86 BCE, while Sulla was in Asia Minor. At some point during his two weeks in office, Marius and his colleague Cinna appointed Caesar *flamen dialis*. Caesar was just 13 and does not seem to have occupied the post. On the other hand, a new *flamen dialis* would not be appointed until 10 BCE, so the status of the priesthood from 86 BCE until 44, the year of Caesar’s assassination, remains obscure.

* Marius was Caesar’s father’s sister’s husband.
CAESAR’S LIFE DURING CIVIL WAR

In 84 BCE, at age 16, Caesar married Cornelia,† the daughter of Lucius Cornelius Cinna, the closest political ally of Caesar’s uncle, the great Marius.

At this time, Rome was slipping into civil war. Cornelia’s father Cinna was, in fact, murdered by his troops that same year, because they did not want to leave Italy to fight Sulla overseas. Sulla and his troops were en route to Italy from Asia Minor. When Sulla eventually landed in Italy in 83 BCE, the year Caesar turned 17, Sulla marched on Rome, defeated the allies of Marius and Cinna, who were then still in control of the government, and was appointed dictator. Sulla’s dictatorship provided another model for the young Caesar.

Sulla used his dictatorship to reform the government and to restrict the power of such populist institutions as the tribunate. He instituted a reign of terror, which we call the proscriptions—a program of executing perceived enemies of the state and confiscating their property. The names of the proscribed were drawn up in lists, which were put on public display. It was lawful to kill proscribed citizens on sight, and this permitted the murderer to claim a portion of the proscribed person’s property.

Caesar’s patrician birth and close family connections with both Marius and Cinna made him prominent and suspect. Sulla confiscated Caesar’s inheritance and Cornelia’s dowry. He took away Caesar’s priesthood (although this is not certain) and ordered Caesar to divorce the hated Cinna’s daughter, Cornelia. Caesar adamantly refused‡ and thus had to go into hiding. Caesar’s mother stepped in and appealed directly to Sulla with the help of Vestal priestesses. Sulla gave way, famously quipping that he saw many Mariuses—and thus great danger to the state—in Caesar.

† Cornelia was, like Caesar, patrician, and they married according to a religious form of marriage that only patricians used. The ceremony involved an ancient grain called far and was thus called confarreate marriage, in which the wife passed into the paternal power of her husband and became the legal equivalent of his daughter.

‡ Caesar would remain married to Cornelia until she died in 69 BCE. Cornelia also gave birth to Caesar’s only daughter, Julia.
Marius’s reforms of the army became permanent, and Sulla’s dictatorship would also serve as a model for those who, like Caesar, came of age during Rome’s protracted civil war. Sulla’s religious institutions also served as a model. Sulla called himself *epaphroditus*, the “beloved of Aphrodite,” who in Latin was Venus. Venus bestowed charm, attractiveness, and persuasive speech in the forum or on the battlefield.

Along with his devotion to Venus, Sulla claimed special luck or fortune. His Latin nickname was *Felix*, the “Lucky One.” But luck in the scheme of ancient religious conceptions was hardly random chance. Luck was a goddess in her own right, and luck was bestowed by gods, including Venus. To proclaim one’s luckiness was to claim special favors from the gods.

Sulla made life too dangerous, so Caesar left Italy for Asia Minor, where he joined the army, fighting with distinction under the command of Publius Servilius Vatia Isauricus. Still a teenager, Caesar earned the second highest of Rome’s military honors, the civic crown, which was awarded *ob cives servatos*, “for saving the lives of fellow citizens.”

After his military service, Caesar spent time studying rhetoric and philosophy in Greece, which served as a finishing school for Rome’s ruling class.

Sulla died in 78 BCE at age 60, and his death bequeathed to Caesar, who turned 22 that year—a path back to Rome. Caesar’s property had been confiscated, so he turned to a legal career and moneylenders to support himself and his ambitions. In 73 BCE, the year he turned 27, Caesar was co-opted into the college of pontiffs to take the place of a deceased uncle. Caesar may have been cash-strapped, but the ruling class recognized him as one of their own.

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*S Venus was not among Rome’s original gods, but she came to Rome during wartime. Her first known temple was vowed during the Third Samnite War in 295 BCE.

¶ To earn the civic crown, a soldier had to kill the enemy, thus saving his fellow citizen, but then additionally hold onto the territory formerly occupied by the enemy.
CAESAR’S POLITICAL CAREER

- Caesar began his political career at age 28 with election to a minor post. At 30, Caesar was elected one of 20 quaestors.

- In Rome, as one climbed the political ladder, or *cursus honorum*, the number of available slots kept getting smaller. There were 20 slots for quaestors and six for aediles, whose work was important for urban administration. The aediles oversaw roadwork, temple maintenance, crime prevention, and the distribution of food. They were also responsible for putting on the games associated with religious festivals, and, at age 34, in 65 BCE, Caesar was elected aedile. Caesar, we are told, had to borrow heavily to ensure that, at the next election, the people would remember both the generosity of his games and his devotion to the gods.

- Caesar continued his religious work on behalf of the state in 63 BCE, when he was one of two judicial officers in charge of prosecuting treason, or *perduellio*. Treason was considered a religious offense, which required propitiation of Rome’s tutelary god. The convicted traitor was slaughtered for the god.

- During that same year, Caesar stood for the post of *pontifex maximus*, or chief pontiff. His opponent offered to pay Caesar’s considerable debts if Caesar would withdraw. Caesar instead borrowed more heavily.

- The republic was breaking down, and religious politics played their role. Caesar spent the decade after his consulship in Gaul waging an aggressive war that his political opponents considered criminal—Cato the Younger wanted to hand Caesar over to the enemy—but a war that was popular among Caesar’s adherents. Not only did Caesar win, but he became rich.

- Roman armies financed themselves through plunder and the slave trade. Slave traders accompanied military expeditions, and Caesar flooded the market, becoming fabulously wealthy himself and using those funds to pay for political operatives back in Rome.

** We can still read Caesar’s military dispatches, or *Commentarii de Bello Gallico*, as well as his commentaries on the civil war that he eventually fought from 49 to 45 BCE against the Senate.
After his victories over Gaul and the Senate of Rome’s republican government, Caesar offered a twofold solution to the collapse of republican institutions: military dictatorship—this is the model he learned from Sulla—but on the basis of his own personal divinity.

Caesar had proclaimed his divine ancestry from the beginning of his political career. There is evidence that suggests that even before his assassination, Caesar had become the god Divus Iulius,†† which may be translated as the “God Julius” or the “Divine Julius.” And in 42 BCE, responding to widespread and deeply held popular conviction, the Senate made Caesar a god by solemn and legal decree.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Julius Caesar manipulated traditional Roman religion for his own political advantage. Does this mean that Caesar was irreligious? Are political calculations for one’s own advantage and personal religiosity incompatible? Why or why not?

2. After his death, Caesar was declared a god by the Roman Senate and public religious rites were instituted in his honor. Some senators who had known Caesar the man were demonstrably skeptical of his divinity. On the other hand, the people of Rome by all reports warmly welcomed and enthusiastically participated in the worship of this new god. What features of traditional Roman religion as well as aspects of Caesar’s career might have contributed to such spontaneous devotion?

†† Evidence for this includes the institution of Mark Antony as his personal priest, or flamen.
EMPEROR WORSHIP IN ROME
The deification of Julius Caesar represents a turning point in Rome’s religion as well as a prelude to further transformation, just as Rome’s long civil war and Caesar’s dictatorship were already leading to the transformation of Rome’s republican institutions into a monarchy—or, perhaps more accurately, a military dictatorship. It was the genius of Octavius, later known as Augustus, to institute a monarchy that possessed the outward appearance of a republic, setting a paradigm imitated by many a dictator since.

**THE DEIFICATION OF JULIUS CAESAR**

- When senatorial conspirators assassinated Caesar on March 15th, 44 BCE, they hoped that the republican constitution would once again begin to work. Annual consuls would again represent executive authority without the superior office of Caesar’s unending dictatorship, from which post he had preselected candidates, set the agenda, and predetermined the outcomes of debates. Offices, governorships, and commands had all become dependent on the will of one man.

- Arrogant members of Rome’s ruling class were competitive. They did not tolerate superiors whom they had no hope of replacing. Even worse, despite their fears, Caesar had not instituted proscriptions to slaughter his enemies on the model of Sulla. Instead, Caesar proclaimed his mercy, or *clementia*, and forgave them their roles on Pompey’s side during the civil war. He allowed them to hold office. Owing their lives and careers to Caesar, they hated him with unrelenting thirst for revenge.

- Caesar’s efforts at self-deification cannot have helped reconcile the ruling class to his rule, but why would he have undertaken such a project? Surely he knew how resentful his colleagues would be to welcome Caesar back not only as their master but as a new god. This is controversial. The month of July was named for Caesar during his lifetime—an honor hitherto reserved for gods.
On the other hand, it is uncontroversial that Caesar was deified after his death. There was long precedence for this. After his death, Romulus, the first king of Rome, was worshipped as the god Quirinus. Heroes, too, were human beings who had become gods, and the very idea of a soul that leaves the body to continue existence after death is suggestive of the possibility that a divinity lives within the human body.

It is also uncontroversial that the Romans were aware of the worship of living rulers as gods in Egypt, Greece, and the Near East. Roman generals, too, had from time to time received divine honors, but this took place outside Rome. Rome was itself a republic whose citizens were human beings who lived among the gods with whom they keep the peace through the *cultus deorum*.

In more recent times, living rulers have been worshipped as divine. In the 20th century, Hitler was well on the way to deification in the poetry of his youth minister, Baldur von Schirach, and his contemporary, the emperor of Japan, was in fact already considered a god. And these were leaders of highly educated and advanced societies.

Caesar correctly diagnosed, moreover, the need for political change in the Roman Republic. Civil war had broken out regularly from the time of the Gracchi in 133 BCE. Sulla had restored the traditional institutions of the republic during his dictatorship in 83 BCE, but this had led to yet another civil war from 49 to 45 BCE. Caesar looked for solutions. One error that Sulla had made was resigning the dictatorship. Caesar’s dictatorship was thus made *perpetuus*, or “without expiration.”
Evidence suggests that Caesar wanted to exchange his dictatorship for a crown and become king. This was a miscalculation, as it would have trumpeted the end of the republic, and Roman education trained its citizens to hate the name “king,” or *rex*. When Antony offered a crown at the Lupercalia festival in February 44 BCE, the crowd groaned, and one month later, Caesar was dead. His successor would reject both dictatorship and kingship as possible political solutions.

But Caesar had also built a religious foundation for his new rule, and his religious legacy would, in fact, be adopted and become permanent.

Caesar claimed descent from Iulus and Aeneas, and thus Venus as well as Romulus, and thus Mars.* And at some point in 42 BCE, the Roman Senate legally decreed that Caesar was a god. This legislation was subsequently developed under the rule of Caesar’s great-nephew and adoptive son, Gaius Octavius, who was destined to become the first Roman emperor Augustus. Octavius would reject dictatorship and kingship in favor of other titles, but he made shrewd use of his adoptive father’s religious inheritance.

* Shortly after Caesar’s assassination, a comet appeared in the sky for seven nights during the first games, or *ludi*, consecrated to his memory. This comet appears on numerous coins and offered proof for those with eyes that could see that the soul of their hero had been received among the gods.
GAIUS OCTAVIUS’S RISE TO POWER

In 44 BCE, Caesar was assassinated. Gaius Octavius was 18 years old and waiting for his great-uncle in Greece in anticipation of a projected invasion of Parthia (which roughly corresponds to the territory of modern Iran). After the assassination, Gaius Octavius discovered that Caesar had adopted him in his will. This seems to have come as a surprise to him, but this is not difficult to believe, as Caesar may have still hoped for a son. The provision for a son to inherit his name and his family’s ancestral religion is another instance of the care Romans took for these religious considerations. Caesar’s adoption of an adult male was motivated by religion and politics.

Octavius was quick to make use of his religious inheritance. After a discussion of risks and benefits with his family, he accepted his inheritance and became, by tradition, Gaius Julius Gaii Filius Caesar Octavianus,† who simply called himself Gaius Julius Caesar. After Caesar’s deification, however, he began to style himself Gaius Divi Filius Iulius Caesar.‡

Scholars, on the other hand, call him Octavius before he took Caesar’s inheritance, Octavian after he was adopted by Caesar’s last will and testament, and Augustus after he became emperor. This helps scholars and readers distinguish between the three phases of his life and career: Octavius while Caesar lived, Octavian after the assassination, and Augustus after he emerged as emperor.

† *Gaui Filius* signified that he was the son of the Julius Caesar whose first name was Gaius. The general practice was also to retain one’s original name as an adjective. Octavius thus became the Octavian Caesar. So, in English, this name is Gaius, the son of Gaius, Julius Caesar Octavianus.

‡ *Divi Filius* may be translated as “son of god,” “son of a god,” or “son of the god.” Translated into English, Octavian called himself “Gaius Julius Caesar, Son of God.”
Once in power, Octavian faced the same task at which both Sulla and Caesar had failed: how to put Roman government back on some sort of constitutional basis. The goal was monarchy. The challenge was that for historical reasons and popular perception, the monarchy had to look like a restoration of the republic. After various experiments and attempts, in 23 BCE, a solution was worked out that concentrated overwhelming powers in the princeps, or “first citizen.”

In a nutshell, for territories outside the city of Rome, Octavian was granted proconsular authority greater than the authority of any other proconsul. Romans called this authority imperium. Proconsular imperium could be held indefinitely. That settled Octavian’s position outside the city.

Although a patrician and thus prohibited from holding the post of tribune of the plebeians, Octavian was granted tribunicia potestas, or “tribunician authority,” for life inside the city. This made his person sacrosanct, or religiously inviolable. Anyone who threatened or even insulted him was thus guilty of treason. He had the right to veto all other magistrates. He had a right to summon the Senate and propose laws to the assembly. The years of his reign could be dated by the year of his tribunicia potestas.

In addition to this constitutional manipulation, the provinces of the Roman Empire were divided according to whether they were peaceful or required numerous legions. The Senate, which continued to send proconsuls in the old way, received the peaceful provinces, while the princeps retained control as a proconsul of the provinces with the vast majority of legions, to which he sent legati, or personal representatives, who used his, not their own, auspices. These legati reported not to the Senate but to the princeps. Revenues from the senatorial and imperial provinces were distributed analogously.

§ Our word prince derives from this Latin adjective that means “first.”
The princeps, in short, retained overwhelming military power, most of the revenues, and the authority to veto and initiate legislation in Rome, too, without the nuisance of performing the duties of a magistrate in Rome. There was no longer any person or institution with the power to check him, yet the princeps could allow others to hold the consulship as well as all the other old offices of the republic, thus satisfying their ambition for honors and prestige. The old republic appeared to live on.

And the crucial power that allowed him to retain authority was a power that derived from an office but did not require holding that office: *tribunicia potestas*.

Because Augustus did not need to hold an official office in Rome to wield power, he could exercise direct authority over most of the empire from his house on the Palatine Hill. The house of Augustus becomes de facto the place from which the empire is ruled. His slaves and freedmen become the imperial bureaucracy. He funds the government from his private purse, or *fiscus*—hence our many terms related to fiscal matters.

**WORSHIP OF THE LIVING RULER**

From a religious perspective, government from the house of the princeps has transformative implications, too. Augustus’s ancestral family religion is intimately tied up with the new god of the state, the god who on earth was Gaius Julius Caesar. Citizens publicly participate in the worship of the living ruler’s father. The worship of Caesar was firmly established with a temple in Rome, a priesthood, and a religious festival in July—so, in other words, in exact conformance to traditional religious requirements. But Augustus’s family religion offered additional opportunities.

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The Palatine Hill gives us the word *palace* in English—that is, the place where the ruler lives.
Traditionally, all members of a Roman household would participate in the worship and celebration of the indwelling spirit, or *genius*, of the head of household, the *pater familias*. So, Augustus also imposed worship of his *genius* on the entire citizenry, which, as *pater patriae*, was logically and religiously proper. A state religious festival was established for the entire people to celebrate Augustus’s *genius* on his birthday. A new priesthood of Augustales was established for the worship of his *genius*. All oaths were generally sworn by the *genius*. Worship of Augustus became part of the religious worship associated with Lares Compitales, which were the Lares of the crossroads. Poets celebrated Augustus as a god who lingered on the earth.

For a political opponent of Augustus, and an adherent of the old republic’s constitution, it would have been impossible to escape this form of religiously imposed adoration of, and demonstrations of loyalty to, the princeps.

Just as Augustus moderated the appearance of his usurpation of supreme authority, so he used traditional forms of religion to transform traditional religion into the worship of his family and personal authority.

Augustus came as close as possible to permitting divine worship of his person without actually violating traditional norms within Rome and Italy. And elsewhere, especially in the East, where ruler worship was long established, there were few constraints. The cities of the empire began to compete with each other to demonstrate their loyalty to the emperor by establishing temples and cults of the emperor as a god.

Humans who become gods and gods who appear in human form were traditional concepts in Roman religion as well as ancient Mediterranean religions more generally.
As emperor worship or ruler cult evolves, the distinction between the city of Rome and the rest of the empire becomes fainter. Already under Tiberius, who succeeds Augustus as the second emperor of Rome (again, by way of adoption), we find even in literary works the idea that the living princeps is a god with divine powers.**

Keep in mind that this was a world full of gods and divine powers; there was always room for more. Outside the ruling class, too, people in Rome, Italy, and the provinces were more than happy to see the end of civil war and the introduction of good government. Republican governors had been notoriously corrupt. The emperor no longer permitted his representatives to loot and plunder for personal gain. They remitted instead regular taxes credited to his accounts, his *fiscus*.

As the emperors succeeded one another, the distinction between Rome and Italy on the one hand and the provinces on the other diminished. Some emperors demanded too much. The third emperor, Caligula, for example, liked to appear dressed as a god and call himself Jupiter. He was assassinated and was not deified.

Some emperors, on the other hand, took their divinity in stride. For example, Vespasian was considered a good emperor, and he was duly consecrated after his death.

** Valerius Maximus wrote a work entitled *Memorable Deeds and Sayings* in which he invokes at the beginning not a muse or a god, but instead the living emperor Tiberius.
Despite hiccups, the system established by Augustus, including the cult of the Caesars, worked. And ruler cult served as an essential and unifying religious practice across a multilingual empire that brought together numerous ethnicities and countless gods.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. What features of Roman religion enabled Gaius Octavius to become Gaius Julius Caesar? Legal testamentary adoption in this instance would have imposed on Octavian the duty of maintaining Caesar’s family cult. How did this duty in turn, according to concepts embedded in Rome’s ancestral worship, help Octavian literally become the embodiment of his adoptive father?

2. How was the cult of the emperors helpful in creating a civic identity in an empire that united such diverse peoples, religions, and languages?
ZOROASTRIANS, JEWS, AND CHRISTIANS
Extensive parallels exist in the religious conceptions of the diverse peoples who lived under the Persian Empire and then, in the 4th century BCE, were united in the empire of Alexander the Great, which included, albeit briefly, Greece, Asia Minor, Egypt, the Near East, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and India to the Indus River.* After the death of Alexander, his Hellenized Macedonian generals divided these territories among themselves and established new dynasties. As they fell out among themselves—and especially after the Romans began interfering more effectively in the affairs of the eastern Mediterranean in the 2nd century BCE—Armenia, Iraq, Persia, and the territories reaching to the Indus River broke free of their Greek and Macedonian rulers. Native Persian rule reemerged in what we now call Iran. This was the kingdom of Parthia.

**ANCIENT IRANIAN RELIGION**

- The religion of the Parthians likely received influences from and likely had influenced other religious traditions of the Near East as well.
- Zoroastrianism was adopted by the Sasanian dynasty and served as the state religion of Parthia from the 3rd century CE through the middle of the 7th century CE—that is, until their dynasty and their religion fell to Arab invaders and a new religion, Islam.
- Before the Parthians and Persians established their empire, there was the empire of the Medes. They, too, were an ancient Iranian people, as were Parthians and Persians. But when talking about Medes, we travel back to the 6th century BCE, so more than a thousand years before the arrival of Islam. This is the era, according to Herodotus—the Greek chronicler of the wars between Greeks and Persians—when Zoroaster† reformed the Persian religion. Modern scholars have argued for even earlier dates, placing Zoroaster between 1000 and 600 BCE.

* Located today in the middle of what is now Pakistan.
† Zoroaster is his name filtered through Greek. Closer to the original is the spelling Zarathustra.
Our knowledge of the religion of the Medes and Persians is meager and depends on such alien sources as Herodotus, who tells us the basics:

It is not their custom to make and set up statues and temples and altars, but those who do such things they think foolish, because, I suppose, they have never believed the gods to be like human beings, as the Greeks do; but they call the whole vault of heaven Zeus, and to him they sacrifice on the highest peaks of the mountains; they sacrifice also to the sun and moon and earth and fire and water and winds. At the beginning, these were the only gods to whom they sacrificed; later they learned to sacrifice to the “heavenly” Aphrodite from the Assyrians and Arabians.

The teachings of Zoroaster are contained in 17 Gathas, or hymns of the Avesta, a religious text written in Middle Persian, an Indo-European language closely related to Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, and the rest.

Zoroaster’s reforms appear to introduce a monotheistic religion based on ethics and morality. There is one god, Ahura Mazda—the “Wise Lord” and the traditional god of the bright sky and the promoter of goodness, justice, and light. The primary opponent of Ahura Mazda is Ahriman, who promotes evil with the help of the daevas, or other gods, and the druj, or evil spirits. Zoroaster prohibits animal sacrifice and the intoxicating beverage haoma, which is like soma of the Rigveda, although these restrictions appear to have been relaxed in practice.

Fire was central to worship. Every Zoroastrian home was supposed to have a sacred fire burning in an urn. Temples likewise housed an urn in which a sacred fire was kept burning. Perfumes were sprinkled over the fire several times a day. Five times a day, a priest was supposed to enter the temple.
His mouth was covered with a veil to prevent his breath from polluting the fire. His hands were gloved as he put logs of sandalwood on the fire, and he recited three times daily sacred words, which signified:

Repel evil thoughts! Repel evil words! Repel evil deeds!

These words reflect the moral teaching of Zoroastrianism.

Indeed, the goal for human beings in this life is to pursue $aša$, or justice, and thus, to support Ahura Mazda’s efforts, human beings must avoid lies and evil misconduct. Personal virtues consist especially in honesty and straight-dealing; sexual purity, which is to say sex only within the confines of marriage; charity toward the poor; and hospitality toward guests and strangers.

Zoroastrian doctrine on the fate of the soul after death also promoted right conduct in this life. The soul of the deceased haunted the home for three days before traveling to a tribunal for final judgment, where a scale awaited. Merits and faults were placed on a balance, and there were three possible fates. If merits and faults were in balance, the deceased spirit continued in a state of equilibrium. If merits outweighed faults, the soul proceeded to the abodes of bliss. But if the faults had the preponderance, then the darkness of the abyss swallowed the spirit.

In this monotheistic faith with an emphasis on moral conduct, we see similarities to Judaism, whose sky god Yahweh supplanted the other deities of his pantheon as the only true god, thus demoting the others to the status of angels or demons. It also bears a resemblance to the efforts of Greek philosophers to put the gods, or even just one God, on the side of morality. And in posthumous judgment of the soul at a tribunal where merits are weighed against faults, it is difficult not to think of the tribunal before Osiris, where Anubis oversees the weighing of the heart against the feather of Maat while his hungry companion Ammit lurks nearby.

† Zoroaster seems to have been a reformer of the Magian religion.
Many varieties of Christianity, too, will emphasize moral conduct as the key, combined with a faith, to the gates of heaven. Other varieties will assert that faith alone matters, but even then, conduct serves as evidence of true faith, so it is safe to assert that Christianity, like Judaism and Zoroastrianism, is a religion where personal morality and personal conduct matter—even if Martin Luther and John Calvin would later seek to eliminate the effectiveness of human actions, no matter how good or moral, as influencing the decision making of an infinitely more perfect and absolutely sovereign God.

Zoroastrianism and Christianity would both influence another Iranian religion, Manichaeism, that would in late antiquity rival early Christianity.

**ROMAN JUDAEA**

Roman interference in the territory that would become the Roman province of Judaea dates to the 60s BCE. By this date, the history of ancient Israel already stretched back more than a thousand years. The territory had also experienced Babylonian conquest in 587 BCE, with subsequent deportations. The Persians conquered Babylon in 539, and the Jews were allowed to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem between 520 and 515. This temple is known as the Second Temple, and the Jews were governed as an autonomous province within the Persian Empire.

This period of Judaism—from the rebuilding of the temple in the 500s BCE to the destruction of the temple by the Romans in 70 CE—is called Second Temple Judaism. It differed markedly from the paganism that surrounded it by rejecting polytheism as well as visual representations of deity in human form. The rejection of imagery made Greek statuary and the subsequent representation of Roman emperors deeply offensive to religious sensibilities, especially to the sensibilities of those who loathed the Greco-Roman invaders.

§ Judaea is the Latin name for what had been Canaan and Israel.
On the other hand, Second Temple Judaism also shared deep affinities with the Mediterranean paganisms that surrounded it. The national God of the Jews was in origin a sky god like Zeus or Jupiter or Ahura Mazda. And worship of this God included animal sacrifice, which was superintended by a priestly class with specialized knowledge of correct procedure.

Judaism was different, but not completely alien, when the Romans arrived. And among the Jews themselves, some were attracted to Greek civilization and culture—these were the Hellenizers—and others rejected it completely. There existed both internal strife and external pressures.

Alas, many people in Roman Judaea were unhappy. They were unhappy with Greek cultural influences, with Roman political domination, with the economic situation, and with their native rulers, who did Rome’s bidding. Their political and economic unhappiness combined, too, with their religious sensitivities. Religion fueled their anger and sustained them in their conviction that their cause, because it conformed with their religious beliefs, was a righteous one.

This general state of affairs continued under Herod’s rule, and when Herod died in 4 BCE, his realm was divided among four surviving sons, the tetrarchs, who each ruled a quarter of their father’s kingdom. Mismanagement led to direct Roman administration in 6 CE.

The situation in Roman Judaea was complex, both politically and religiously, and it was also increasingly volatile. Riots and rebellions continued, and this was the general atmosphere in which Jesus was born, raised, and preached.
THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY FROM WITHIN JUDAISM

Jesus was a native of Judaea who shared the religion of his countrymen, and it was to them that he preached his message. When his message irritated the ruling classes and administrators, Jesus was executed by the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate, who executed other religious Jews who, in his view, fomented insurrection and rebellion.

After the death of Jesus, his followers began preaching his teachings not only to fellow Jews, but also to gentiles—that is, non-Jews—and it is at this point in the history of the movement that Christianity begins to diverge from Judaism. In the beginning, gentile converts to the teachings of Jesus were supposed to subject themselves to all of Mosaic law, including dietary restrictions and circumcision for men.

This was a heavy price and disincentive. The apostles Paul and Peter argued that acceptance of Jesus’s teachings was enough. As Peter put it,

Why tempt ye God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples?

Paul discussed the miracles worked by gentile converts as proof that Mosaic law was not necessary. But the hard-liners lost the argument, and the movement began to diverge.

Crucifixion was a standard means of capital punishment at that time, for both slaves and non-Romans. The Romans treated Jesus the way they treated anyone who gathered together unauthorized assemblies of people that appeared to threaten public order and Roman rule.
As far as the Romans were concerned, however, followers of Jesus were Jews. They did not concern themselves with the distinctions Jews made among themselves: Sadducees, Pharisees, Essenes, and followers of Jesus. Only when a group threatened the Roman order did the Romans intervene. And, from the time of Julius Caesar, Judaism was recognized as a legal ancestral faith—a licit religion, or *religio licita*—which pleased the gods, as opposed to an illicit or illegal religion, which threatened public order and Roman rule.

The Romans had always supported traditional religious practices among their diverse subjects as a means to keep as many gods as possible happy. Judaism enjoyed this general self-interested benevolence, and the Romans even learned to accommodate Jewish sensitivities by, for example, allowing Jews to offer sacrifices on behalf of the emperor in their temple rather than to an image of the emperor.

As long as followers of Jesus identified as Jews, they benefited from the legal status of Judaism as an ancestral faith. The reign of Caligula, however, brought a crisis.

After the Jews destroyed an altar in Jamnia, Caligula ordered his statue installed in Jerusalem. The order was eventually rescinded, and Caligula was assassinated. Troubles continued, and in 64 BCE, after the Roman governor Gessius Florus took 17 talents from the temple to pay for arrears in tribute, riots broke out that overwhelmed local Roman garrisons. The Greeks in nearby Caesarea massacred 20,000 Jews.

In 66 BCE, Nero entrusted command over military operations in Judaea to Vespasian. It took the Romans four years to crush the rebellion, and on August 4th, 70 CE, during the siege of Jerusalem, the Second Temple was destroyed. **

** An arch commemorating Rome’s victory still stands in Rome, and it depicts some of the treasures looted from the temple, including a menorah, trumpets, and other sacred objects.
Even then, the Jewish fortress at Masada held on for another two years, but eventually the rebellion was crushed everywhere, and the Romans wanted reimbursement. In addition to taking plunder, the Romans sold many local inhabitants into slavery.†† The Jewish diaspora spread throughout the empire.

The impact on the history of Judaism was profound. Animal sacrifice, which was conducted only at the temple, ceased. The centrality of the temple and its rituals had to be replaced. This led to meditation on the law as a substitute for sacrifice and the rise of rabbinic Judaism.

Rome’s brutal subjugation of the Jews in 70 CE did not put an end to unrest.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. In what ways are monotheistic religions better able to satisfy the objections of Greek philosophers to the inadequacy of traditional polytheism’s conception of (imperfect) gods?

2. How likely or unlikely do you think it is that the religions of the eastern Mediterranean and ancient Near East influenced one another?

†† The Colosseum in Rome was built with the help of Jewish slave labor.
POPULAR RELIGIONS OF LATE ANTIQUITY
As Christianity spread, hostility of the pagan Roman state to Christianity grew. Why was Christianity offensive to pagans in ways that other religions were not? The spread of Christianity also leads naturally to a few questions: Was paganism in decline? Why would Christianity have spread if people were satisfied with their ancestral religious practices?

**THE PERSECUTION OF CHRISTIANS**

- Christianity escaped close notice in its earliest phases because, for all practical purposes, it was a stream of Judaism, which was itself a legally permissible ancestral practice, a *religio licita*. With the abandonment of the requirement, however, that gentile converts also adhere to Mosaic law, gentiles would come to outnumber Jews, who, in their turn, would not recognize as Jews converts who failed to follow Mosaic law.

- Nevertheless, the cover of Judaism was useful for early Christians—until it wasn’t. Unrest in Judaea was on the rise, as was Roman irritation at proselytes. The Romans could not really tell them apart.

- By the 60s of the 1st century CE, however, the Christians had caught the eye of Roman authorities as a distinct religious group. The historian Tacitus—our only authority who reports this first persecution of Christians—presents it as a way for the emperor Nero* to find someone to punish after the Great Fire of Rome in 64 CE.

- Tacitus tells us that of Rome’s 14 districts, just four were left intact. Three districts were leveled to the ground, and the rest suffered devastating losses, with huge loss of life. A disaster of this magnitude was officially treated as a demonstration of divine wrath. There had been some breach of the truce with the gods, or *pax deorum*. Traditional religious methods were employed to determine what remedies might avail to propitiate the gods.

* Because Nero aimed to use the tragedy of the Great Fire as an opportunity for redesigning the city and the erection of grandiose buildings, including a new “Golden House” for himself, people accused him of setting the fire deliberately.
Nero blamed the Christians, and Tacitus’s description of the sect is our earliest description by a traditionally religious Roman:

Nero fastened the guilt and inflicted the most exquisite tortures on a class hated for their abominations, called Christians by the populace. Christus, from whom the name had its origin, suffered the extreme penalty during the reign of Tiberius at the hands of one of our procurators, Pontius Pilatus, and a most mischievous superstition, thus checked for the moment, again broke out not only in Judæa, the first source of the evil, but even in Rome, where all things hideous and shameful from every part of the world find their center and become popular.

Tacitus displays the typical arrogance of Rome’s ruling class toward the religion of the lower classes and provincials.

The Christians were rounded up and convicted. Nero aimed to make their punishments exemplary, but his efforts backfired, and instead of inspiring a feeling of vindicated satisfaction at the punishment of the perpetrators, popular opinion sympathized with the Christians, who became victims tortured for the sake of Nero’s cruelty.

This first persecution, which seems opportunistic, nevertheless reveals some fundamental elements that will target Christians for similar persecutions in the future. The origin of their religion was Judæa, but they were not Jews. Their religion was thus illicit. As converts to a monotheism, they had abandoned ancestral religious traditions as well as participation in the worship of the wider community.
By the logic of traditional religion, this breach would have angered the gods who had previously received their worship and ruptured the truce that the state strove to maintain with potentially angry deities, the *pax deorum*.

Tacitus also tells us that the Christians were not convicted so much for the crime of arson as “hatred of humankind”: *odio humani generis*. This is a key point. Whether they set fires or not, Christians would be held culpable.

In what sense did Christians “hate the human race”? Christians openly declared that the gods worshipped by others were evil demons, and they refused to participate in the community ceremonies that kept the peace with the gods and thus ensured the safety of the state and the community. What could motivate people to behave in this way, except utter contempt for their neighbors, their rulers, and the immortal gods?

The very existence of Christians was thus a standing religious offense to the immortal gods. Their presence was both criminal and dangerous for the community—at least according to the logic of traditional religious thought.

There was an additional charge against Christians: They were stubborn, obstinate, and disobedient when offered the chance to repent and display their loyalty. Roman magistrates wielded strong coercive authority. To disobey a magistrate was a serious offense, and the lower classes of Rome disobeyed the command of a magistrate at their peril.

For those who did not confess freely, a sacrifice test was developed to determine whether someone was, in fact, a Christian.

The test was simple. A fire was burning on an altar. When asked to offer a sacrifice to the gods of the Romans, an individual was required to throw some incense on the flames of that fire.

Accused Christians could prove their innocence by rejoining the human race and offering this simple sacrifice. Many did so and escaped—with their earthly lives, at least. Others, however, refused.
The magistrate could then repeat the request as a command. Continued refusal was akin to contempt of court in a society where obedience to authority was demanded and expected, especially of the lower classes.

Persecution may have been logical, but it did not occur frequently or for very long periods of time. Roman authorities preferred to look the other way and offer an escape. Before 64 CE, the year of Nero’s persecution, any Christian martyrs were too closely integrated with contemporary Judaism for us to distinguish between the two religions. The sacrifice test emerged in the early 100s, and reports of occasional martyrs are sporadic until the reign of the emperor Decius, who issued a decree in 249 that citizens had to obtain a certificate that attested to their participation in public sacrifice. This was the first empire-wide persecution.

Some Christians hired others to perform the sacrifice for them. Others simply did what was required. These were the lapsi—those who had slipped, or “lapsed Christians.” And some were, of course, martyred. This persecution ended in a year.

A more sustained persecution took place along the same lines and lasted for years during the reign of Diocletian, beginning in 302. It ended only with the death of Diocletian in 313. And by 324, Christianity would be the preferred religion of the empire after the conversion of the emperor Constantine.

The persecution of Christians was sporadic and, with the exceptions of those under Decius and Diocletian, neither empire-wide nor sustained. In the instances of Decius and Diocletian, there was a solid religious logic behind the drive for demonstrations of civic loyalty through religion.

Both emperors attempted to quell military anarchy and insurrection, which served, of course, as demonstrations of divine anger. Reinstating civil peace, however, required loyalty and obedience to the authority of the emperor, which was best demonstrated through participation in the public sacrifices offered to the gods of the state and the divinity of the emperor. To refuse was to demonstrate godless hatred of the human race as well as obstinate sedition.
These efforts were spectacularly unsuccessful. Was paganism in decline? Did people simply cease to believe in the old gods? The evidence is overwhelming that traditional religion and the ancient gods retained their attractive powers in the hearts of the majority in Italy and Rome, which long remained stubbornly pagan.

**THE WORSHIP OF ISIS**

For those who wanted more than tradition, there were other new religions that were compatible with polytheism and offered benefits similar to those promised by Christianity. Some of these religions were also, for a time, serious competitors to Christianity.

The later Roman Empire was, moreover, an age of syncretism, an era when religions combined and blended gods and elements from different traditions. Such syncretism was in many respects the natural result of Rome’s conquests as well as the granting of Roman citizenship in 212 CE to all free inhabitants of the empire. The disparate realms, city-states, and peoples were gradually growing together religiously.

In the beginning, there was the worship of Rome and the Roman emperor, but other religious forms became both more common and widespread.

Isis, the great goddess of Egypt, had arrived with Osiris (but called Serapis) already in the 2nd century BCE. Three centuries later, we find evidence of devotion to Isis from the British Isles to Asia Minor. We are also fortunate to possess, in the single complete Latin novel that survives from antiquity, the story of a man’s initiation into the mysteries of Isis.
This novel, entitled *Metamorphoses*—or, alternatively, *The Golden Ass*—was written by an author, Apuleius,† who himself personifies the cultural syncretism of the Roman Empire and whose surviving works offer testimony of the religious currents of his time.

Apuleius traveled widely in Italy, Greece, and Asia Minor, and he acquired a deep knowledge of the religious cults on offer. He tells us that he was initiated into the mysteries of Dionysus as well as the Eleusinian mysteries of Demeter.

*Metamorphoses* tells the story of Lucius, an educated upper-class citizen of the Roman Empire who is transformed through magical potions and spells into an ass. This transformation is both literal and figurative; the young man is asinine in many respects. Before he can obtain the antidote and regain his human form, Lucius is launched on an odyssey, and we are permitted to observe through his ass’s eyes all levels of society, civic life, religious life, and magical practices—and eventually his initiation into the cult of Isis.

Apuleius’s Isis syncretizes, or conflates, many gods when she introduces herself to the ass Lucius, who summoned her with his prayer. She not only lays claim to the title of almost every great mother goddess of the Mediterranean, but she also claims to be the one true God who appears under many names. Also in her teachings is the influence of the moral aspect of religion demanded by such philosophers as Plato and instituted in their religions by Egyptians, Zoroastrians, Jews, and others.

From the traditional mystery religions of the eastern Mediterranean to the state religion of Rome to Greek philosophy, Apuleius was an erudite student, and anyone interested in the religious atmosphere of the times has an excellent resource in his novel *Metamorphoses*, or *The Golden Ass*.

† Apuleius’s native language was Punic, a Semitic language of North Africa. He thus composed his surviving works, all of which are in Latin, in a language that was not his native tongue.
Isis tells Lucius that she will return him to human form, but he must dedicate himself to her. Isis demands moral conduct in this life, assists her devotees in this world, and prepares a place for them in the afterlife. She is also all-embracing. Although she lays claim to be the one true God, she has no objections to diverse forms of worship. She is thus compatible with the state religion.

**MITHRAISM AND MANICHAEISM**

Also popular during the later Roman Empire, especially among soldiers, was Mithras. Small groups worshipped together in caves or in underground chambers. We have evidence for some 400 such meeting spots. The origins of Mithras are obscure, but many see in his worship a Roman adaptation of Zoroastrianism.

Mithras seems to have arrived in Rome during the 1st century BCE, but his worship began to spread in the 1st century CE under the emperor Vespasian and remained strong through the 4th century CE. Central to the religious lore of the cult was the slaughter of bulls, many depictions of which survive.

‡ Both the emperors Nero and Commodus were initiated into Mithraism.
Mithras slaughtered the bull at the behest of the sun, which led to creation. Like Ahura Mazda, Mithras fought an everlasting struggle against evil and, at the end of time, was destined to return to the earth. Those who were initiated had to be baptized and confirmed, and the central act of worship was a sacred meal.

Mithras was also sometimes identified with Jupiter, another sky god, as well as with the unconquered sun god, Sol Invictus, whose worship was instituted in the official state worship of the Roman calendar by the emperor Aurelian in the late 3rd century CE. Sol Invictus’s festival day was December 25th, the day after the winter solstice in the Julian calendar, in honor of his birth on that date from a cliff. After he was born, shepherds brought him gifts. He maintained his spot on the sacred calendar of Rome until he was displaced by Christianity.

Christianity even had to compete with religions that borrowed from Christianity. Another 3rd-century faith from Iran or Persia was Manichaeism, as preached by its prophet Mani, who from his post between the Roman Empire and India took elements from Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Christianity—all of which, he argued, were not complete on their own. By 280 CE, the doctrine had reached Rome. It prospered until the 7th century and reached as far as China, where it lasted until the 14th century.

Manichaeism was based on the Zoroastrian and Magian religious practices of Persia. It asserted a strict monotheism but a dualist conception of the universe. Evil rules the material world. Our souls, however, are emanations of the light and goodness that is God, but they are trapped in material, and thus evil, bodies. God releases his light into the world, and we must engage in the fight against darkness and evil on the side of light and the good. Jesus was sent into the world as a messenger but was not himself the answer.

§ The church father Augustine, canonized as Saint Augustine, was an adherent of Manichaeism before converting to Christianity.
The world in which Christianity developed remained full of gods, both ancient and innovative, and the Roman world made room, too, for competing monotheisms. From a historical perspective, it does not appear foreordained that Christianity or even monotheism would triumph over classical, traditional, and ancestral forms of worship. It was also possible that a form of monotheism might have prevailed that was less jealous—one that could permit and accommodate other forms of worship. But these alternative possibilities were not to be.

Before Rome’s empire fell in the West, Christianity became the state religion.

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

1. What aspects of the Christian religion could have been construed by Roman authorities as a threat to the legitimate security interests of the state?

2. As a path to a moral, ethical, and less transactional polytheism, worship of Isis seems like a polytheistic solution to the objections of Greek philosophers. What weaknesses do you think worship of Isis might still have presented?
THE END OF PAGANISM IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE
Why did Christianity prevail over ancestral religious traditions that were thousands of years old and that the Romans had vaunted as their fundamental advantage over all other peoples? And what about potential dangers from neglected ancestral spirits? How could a society possibly abandon what had worked for so long?

THE TRIUMPH OF CHRISTIANITY

It is impossible to know the relative proportions of Christians and pagans in the population of different cities and provinces of the Roman Empire over time. But we do know that the Roman government made sporadic efforts to suppress Christianity and to persecute those who refused to participate in communal religious activities in times of crisis and emergency.

The triumph of Christianity is closely tied to analogous concerns for divine support during civil war—which god, which religion, can help secure political power? Such appeals to religion work best when they resonate with the audience over whom the would-be ruler hopes to establish his authority. What were some of the competitive advantages of Christianity in attracting converts?

Emperor worship, especially after civil disruption and military anarchy—when one “divinity” after another was assassinated only to be replaced by yet another expendable god—was no longer effective at securing loyalty or inspiring confidence.

As Edward Gibbon put it in his History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire:

The ruin of Paganism ... is perhaps the only example of the total extirpation of any ancient and popular superstition; and may therefore deserve to be considered as a singular event in the history of the human mind.
Augustus might well have seemed godlike in establishing his rule and securing peace and prosperity after a century of civil war. But the two-and-a-half-year reign of Decius, from the assassination of his predecessor to his death in battle against the Goths, did not inspire similar adulation.

On a more personal level, the price of admission for pagan religions was high. For example, Apuleius describes in his *Metamorphoses* the main character Lucius’s efforts to gather the necessary funds to pay for initiation into the mysteries of Isis—and Lucius was an educated member of the ruling class.

Initiation into the mysteries of Mithras was open only to men. Soldiers and merchants—men of some means—were the typical adherents.

Healing cults required substantial means for both travel and lodging, not to mention fees for priests, sacrifices, and votive offerings.

Christianity, on the other hand, was open to all. Many early converts were poor, female, or slaves. Christianity offered comfort. Many early converts came to be healed. Miracles documented in the New Testament include the restoration of sight, cure of paralysis, and even resurrection from the dead. Such miracle cures would have appeared familiar to gentiles, whose own religious traditions featured similar cures, as inscriptions and votive offerings from the cults of Asklepios attest in abundance.

A moral code offered guidance for personal conduct. Christian doctrine offered certainty of life after death as well as the possibility of securing a spot, again, at a price that even the poor could afford: simple faith. Moreover, baptism for the remission of sins offered a clean start, no matter what one’s past crimes were.

And after initiation, there were community gatherings with a sacred meal. This meal was likely more substantial than the Communion wafer and small sip of wine distributed during a typical Eucharist today.
There is great theological controversy surrounding how one interprets the sharing of bread and wine, or the Lord’s Supper, as “the body and blood” of Christ, but one view is that the crucifixion of Jesus serves as the replacement for a central feature of traditional religion: animal sacrifice. The Eucharist, which consists of dining on the flesh, or symbolic flesh, of the sacrificial victim—Jesus—serves as a substitute for, or at least a parallel to, the feast that was part and parcel of traditional animal sacrifice.

Christianity offered familiar aspects of traditional religion in a new form. Converts received the benefits of the new religion without having to give up such familiar and central rituals as a post-sacrificial feast.

The cost of conversion was higher for those with more to lose—social standing, wax masks of ancestors, family tombs, statuary—but they were not the majority. Christians also offered community support and aid through charity. There were enough incentives for people to convert, despite the risk of occasional persecutions. But what motivated the Roman government to adopt Christianity as the official religion?

**CONSTANTINE AS THE TURNING POINT**

Diocletian*—who came to power in 284 CE as the result of a military coup and after a long series of prior military usurpations—established a four-man system of rule called the tetrarchy that served as an effective means for defending the frontiers from multiple simultaneous attacks. As emperors came and went, each tetrarch would adopt or appeal to a particular god in an effort both to inspire loyalty and to find a god who can provide practical assistance.

By 311 CE, the empire was divided among four generals with legions and divergent religious policies. Constantine held Spain, Britain, and Gaul; Maxentius had Africa and Italy; Maximinus held part of the East; and Licinius held another part of the East.

* Although Diocletian retired in 305 CE, his religious program stayed in place until his death in 313.
In 311 CE, just before he died, Licinius’s predecessor Galerius, as tetrarch of the East, issued an edict of toleration of Christians. Constantine made a marriage alliance with Licinius, who was tetrarch where Christianity was tolerated. This marriage alliance alerted Christians in the West, where Christianity still suffered persecution, that Constantine might be a tetrarch to watch.

When war broke out between Constantine and Maxentius—who still persecuted Christians—for control over the West, Constantine signaled his support for Christians by putting a Chi-Rho† on the shields of his soldiers. This symbol was an early representation of the crucifix, and it also recruited a fifth column inside Constantine’s Christian-persecuting rival’s territory. It became strategically advantageous during this civil war to proclaim at least potential tolerance of, if not support for, Christianity.

According to the church father Lactantius, on the other hand, Constantine had a dream the night before his battle with Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge near Rome and received the message *in hoc signo vinces*, “under this sign thou shalt conquer.” And this is why Constantine put the Chi-Rho on his men’s shields. There is no reason both versions cannot be true.

Constantine defeated Maxentius and became master of the West. And 12 years later, in 324 CE, Constantine reunited the Roman Empire under the rule of a single monarch. Just as it was for Augustus, religion would serve as an essential element of Constantine’s reorganization and reinvigoration of a failed constitution.

† Chi and rho are the first two letters of the name Christ in Greek.
The break was radical in many ways. Because the history and institutions of the city of Rome were so intimately intertwined with pagan religious traditions, there was little hope of putting the government on a new religious foundation in Rome.

Constantine thus established in 330 CE a new Christian capital in a new city founded on the Bosporus strait between Europe and Asia Minor, and he named it after himself: Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul).

Constantine’s new city evaded Rome’s entrenched paganism. Constantinople, unlike Rome, would have just one God. But monotheism, which might seem ideal for unifying a people, created in practice some real challenges.

Constantine oversaw the hammering out of orthodox doctrine in 325 CE at the first ecumenical council held at Nicaea. The result was a statement of belief that, while not the last word, established the Christian trinity as the triune God, consisting equally and simultaneously in three persons: “One God, Father Almighty, […] one Lord, Jesus Christ, […] and the Holy Ghost.”

Tritheism asserted that the three persons were actually separate beings. These alternative interpretations were branded heresies, and many conflicts would ensue, resulting eventually in the split of the Western and Eastern churches in 1054 in a dispute over the procession of the Holy Spirit. In the East, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the father, but in the West, from the father and the son.

Did Constantine know what he was getting in the bargain when he put the Chi-Rho on his soldiers’ shields?

Constantine’s father was a pagan. Constantine was a pragmatist, but he may have also been a sincere and enthusiastic convert.

† Although the original capital of the Christian world—Constantinople—is still populated by monotheists, it is now almost entirely Muslim.
Constantine was instrumental in establishing the fundamental tenets of orthodox trinitarianism that prevail to this day in churches recognized as Christian by fellow Christians. However, Constantine neither outlawed paganism nor imposed his version of Christianity. This would come later. The process was hardly immediate, and the war against the old gods as well as against heretical Christians was fought on many fronts.

Legally, the process had been gradual. Christianity progressed in stages from invisible, to illegal, to tolerated (that is, legally permissible), to official religion of Rome’s ruler, to mandatory in its orthodox variety. Paganism traveled a reverse path from official and state-supported, to tolerated, to illegal, to invisible.

Constantine was a turning point. The prestige of the emperor inspired many to convert, especially those who aimed to get ahead under the new order. Money flowed, too, into the Christian church. The traditional religion of the Roman state was expensive. Priesthoods, temples, sacrifices, and festivals required funding. And paganism was fundamentally a way of life that permeated how one went about one’s day and conducted one’s business. As the public institutions gradually shuttered, classical religious practices retreated to the private realm.

There was, however, one effort at religious restoration. Julian, the so-called Apostate, ascended to become emperor in 361 and made restoration of paganism his official policy. Christianity was to be permissible for the lower, but not the ruling, classes. But in 363, Julian was wounded in battle and died. Julian’s successor—despite his pagan name, Jovius—was Christian, and official policy quickly returned to the status quo before Julian. The state backed the church.
The Christian cause had help, too, from the faithful, who grew less tolerant of their nonconforming neighbors. Alexandria in Egypt, which from its foundation in 331 BCE by Alexander had been populated by diverse peoples and religions, including a large Jewish population who spoke Greek. They translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek, the edition we call the Septuagint. The Jews suffered numerous attacks, but the Jewish religion remained a legally permissible religion, a *religio licita*.

**CHRISTIANITY AS THE OFFICIAL STATE RELIGION**

Nicene Christianity and orthodox trinitarianism became the official state religion in 380. In 381, persecutions of pagans began with authorized attacks on pagan temples. Between 389 and 392, non-Nicene Christianity was banned. Pagan holidays were turned into workdays. The use of auspices, the religious foundation of ancient Roman authority, was prohibited. The Vestals were disbanded, and the Altar of Victory was removed from the Senate in Rome. In 393, the Olympic Games ceased. In 394, Rome’s eternal flame was extinguished, because it was pagan.

Rome, the city that had conquered the Mediterranean, had become just another provincial backwater, but one with a city government that still maintained the constitutional forms and traditions of the empire and republic, even if the magistrates were prohibited from observing the religious traditions that had informed that constitution.

Was it coincidence, the pagan remnant later asked, when in 410 CE, for the first time since 387 BCE, Rome was sacked? The classically religious were convinced that the gods of Rome were angry at the abolition of their honors and worship—that the *pax deorum* had been breached.

Christians hastened to refute these charges. Augustine’s monumental *On the City of God against the Pagans* not only endeavored to refute pagan religion but also absolved Christianity of causing the sack of the human city of Rome, asserting that Christianity would save humanity for the eternal city of God.

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§ *Septuagint* comes from the Latin word for “seventy,” in reference to the 70 or perhaps 72 Jewish scholars who produced the translation.
These arguments among the educated did not really matter for the multitudes, who were illiterate. Educated opinion mattered less than practice. The law prohibited not only sacrifice and libations of wine, but also secret worship of the family gods, the Lares and Penates at home, and the genius of the father. No one was permitted to erect an altar from turf or worship images—on pain of confiscation of one's property—nor were people allowed to enter the old temples and shrines or picnic at the graves of their ancestors.

With the apparatus of paganism removed from public life and even its secret practice prohibited, memories and knowledge faded, especially in the cities. In the countryside, the old rites survived longer, and in India, they have made room for new gods, but the old gods live on, too.

The immortal gods of the ancient Mediterranean still enjoy an afterlife in myth, literature, and history. And we can still visit the ruins of their altars, temples, and images.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Edward Gibbon called “the extirpation [of paganism] a singular event in the history of the human mind.” In what ways did the life of the mind change with conversion from traditional polytheism to monotheism? If you disagree with Gibbon, what were some simple substitutions that Christianity offered for previous pagan rites and concepts?

2. Not long after Theodosius outlawed all forms of paganism, the city of Rome was sacked. The Western Roman Empire did not, in fact, long survive final conversion to Christianity. Discounting the possible anger of Rome’s ancient gods as a potential factor, are there other reasons why a change in religion may have indeed contributed to the fall of Rome?

¶ We have reports of neighbors reporting on neighbors and door-to-door searches for outlawed religious objects.
I. Ancient Sources That Provide Ready Access to Ancient Religious Attitudes

The most direct route to ancient religious thought and feeling is through the ancient sources themselves. This selection is by no means comprehensive but rather aims at giving those interested in further exploration some representative and intrinsically fascinating places to start that include a heavy dose of religious content.

The Ancient Near East


See also Herodotus below in Greece.

India


Herodotus. *Histories*. Translated by Aubrey De Sélincourt. Revised with introductory matter and notes by John Marincola. London: Penguin Books, 1996. Called the father of history by some and the father of lies by others, Herodotus traveled across the eastern Mediterranean and collected stories everywhere he went. There is seldom a story that does not include references to religious customs. And before the decipherment of hieroglyphs, Herodotus was a major source for Egyptian history, and his stories are still relevant for their insight into Greek attitudes toward the Mediterranean’s Egyptian cultural heritage.


Rome

Apuleius. The Golden Ass. Translated by P. G. Walsh. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999. Apuleius’s humorous account of a young man’s physical transformation and spiritual redemption through his conversion to the worship of Isis offers fascinating insights into the religious world of imperial Rome, where traditional religions intersect with new forms of worship, magic, witchcraft, and crime. The viewpoint, too, is from society generally rather than the ruling class.

Augustine. City of God. Translated by Henry Bettenson. London: Penguin Books, 2004. Shortly after traditional forms of religion were outlawed, Rome was sacked. Coincidence? Not according to the pagans. Augustine thus set to work to vindicate Christianity and, in the process of attacking the old religion, provides great insight into the mental worlds of classical religion as well as early Christianity.


BIBLIOGRAPHY

Livy. *The Rise of Rome: Books One to Five*. Translated by T. J. Luce. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016. Although he lived in the Augustan age after the fall of the republic, the first five books of Livy’s *History of Rome* offer a crucial guide to how Romans perceived the role of religion in shaping their public institutions. These books tell the story from the foundation of Rome by Romulus to its second foundation by Camillus after Rome was sacked by Gauls in 387 BCE.


Marcellinus, Ammianus. *The Later Roman Empire (AD 354–378)*. Translated by Walter Hamilton. London: Penguin Books, 1986. A Greek soldier who wrote in Latin, Ammianus recounts the crucial years when the last pagan emperor, Julian the Apostate, undertook to restore the old religion. Ammianus himself seems to take a dim view of all zealots, both Christian and pagan, and offers a fascinating glimpse of the world before the sun set forever on the old gods.


Plutarch. *The Rise of Rome: Twelve Lives*. Translated by Ian Scott-Kilvert, Jeffrey Tatum, and Christopher Pelling. Rev. ed. London: Penguin Books, 2013. See specifically chapters focusing on Romulus, Numa, and Camillus. While all Roman religion is deeply implicated in all Roman history, the lives of Romulus (Rome’s founder), Numa (Rome’s second king, to whom many religious institutions were attributed), and Camillus (the dictator who led Rome through the crisis of the Gallic invasion when Rome was sacked in 387 BCE and was thus considered a second founder after Romulus) offer especially good insights into republican religious forms.

Vergil. *Aeneid*. Translated by Stanley Lombardo. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2005. The national epic of Rome, the *Aeneid* traces the journey of the Trojan Aeneas, who led survivors from the ruins of
Troy after its sack by Greeks to the fated lands of the West. On the one hand, the mythology allows Rome to connect its legendary history to the heroic myths of Greece; on the other, it presents a religious attitude that’s profoundly different from the *Iliad*. Aeneas is *pius*, or religiously devoted, to his ancestral gods, his duty to his people, and his family. He pays careful attention to omens and offers due sacrifices. One can learn much about Rome’s religious attitudes through careful study of this text.

## II. Studies and Accounts of Ancient Religion

Like the preceding list of ancient sources, this list does not aim to be comprehensive but instead lists works that students who are curious to discover more will find useful and interesting. In the case of those works published more recently, these works will lead industrious students to additional readings. For a bibliography on specific topics, consult *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*, which is listed below under Hornblower.


Breasted, James Henry. *The Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972 [1912]. This classic account sketches the development of Egyptian religion over time, beginning with the older pyramid texts.


———. Greek Religion: Archaic and Classical. Translated by John Raffan. Oxford: Blackwell, 1985. This overview of ancient Greek religion looks at early beginnings as well as the religion of the city, rituals, sanctuaries, heroes, the dead, the gods of polytheism, mystery religions, and philosophical efforts to make sense of traditional religion.


Camp, John M. The Archaeology of Athens. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001. As the director of the excavations of the Athenian Agora under the auspices the American School of Classical Studies in Athens, the author offers an accessible guide to the archaeology of the religious monuments of Athens in historical context.


Dover, K. J. *Greek Popular Morality in the Time of Plato and Aristotle*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1994 [1974]. This book looks at the connections of traditional Greek religion and popular morality in the time of Plato and Aristotle, as well as the efforts of the philosophers to put moral understanding on a radically new philosophical basis.


Gibbon, Edward. *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Abridged, edited, and with a critical foreword by Hans-Friedrich Mueller. New York: Random House, 2003 [1776–1789]. This abridgment focuses especially on preserving Gibbon’s argument regarding the role of religions (pagan, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim) in the collapse of the Roman Empire—not only in the West in 479 CE, but also to the fall of Constantinople in the East in 1453. Out of date, to be sure, but a classic account that still shapes modern approaches and discussions.


Nixey, Catherine. *The Darkening Age: The Christian Destruction of the Classical World*. London: Macmillan, 2018. A tendentious work that is fun to read. It makes points similar to Edward Gibbon’s but without the irony and nuance. It is also considerably shorter!


Ogilvie, R. M. *The Romans and Their Gods in the Age of Augustus*. London: Chattus & Windus, 1969. A brief but comprehensive account that offers insight into early imperial religion through close attention to the ancient sources.


———. *The Gods, the State, and the Individual: Reflections on Civic Religion in Rome*. Translated with a foreword by Clifford Ando. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016. This work looks at diverse scholarly approaches to Roman religion—and especially at the ways
in which monotheistic prejudice has prevented scholars from properly assessing how Roman rituals and religious practices offered effective religious means for binding individual and society in ancient Rome.

Scullard, H. H. *Festivals and Ceremonies of the Late Republic*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1981. Do not let the dry prose style deter you. This book is a gold mine to be dipped into again and again for the bizarre rituals that constituted the official religious calendar of ancient Rome.


Weinstock, Stefan. *Divus Iulius*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971. The still-controversial account of Julius Caesar’s efforts to turn himself into a living god. Though erudite, scholarly, and not easy to read, this is a treasure trove of detailed information on the religious politics of the late Roman Republic.

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