

## Chapter Six

### Religion and Philosophy in the Hellenistic World and the Early Roman Empire

From the political, social, linguistic and cultural changes that followed Alexander's conquests came the religious changes that make the Hellenistic period and the early Roman empire so important in the world's religious history. The most consequential of these changes occurred in Judaism, and we shall take a close look at them - including the origins of Christianity - in Chapters 7-14. The present chapter will focus on the rest of the Near East and the Mediterranean, but we must begin with a glance at India.

#### India

Alexander's foray into northwest India, from 326 to 324 BC, was not as unsettling as were his conquests elsewhere, but they nevertheless left their mark. Alexander's defeat of King Poros in the Panjab, and his brief rule over that territory, seems to have encouraged several important innovations in the Indian subcontinent. City planning, perhaps, was one of these. One of the cities in which Alexander spent some time was Taksasila, in the heart of the northwest Panjab and not far from present-day Islamabad. The old Taksasila was an unplanned and crowded rabbit-warren, but in the late fourth century BC a completely new city was built. The new city had a wide central avenue, with side streets intersecting it at right angles.

A more important development encouraged by contact with the Hellenes was literacy. By the fifth century BC Indians had been illiterate for almost a millennium and a half. The so-called Indus Valley script was used - if indeed it was a script - for writing whatever language was spoken in the Panjab in the third millennium BC, but it fell into disuse early in the second millennium BC with the collapse of the Harappan civilization. The Aryan conquerors of India were themselves illiterate and had no need for a script. The next writing systems to appear in India were the Brahmi and Kharoshthi scripts, both of them used for writing the various Indo-Aryan languages.<sup>1</sup> The Kharoshthi script was used in northwest India and Brahmi everywhere else in the subcontinent. Of the two it was Brahmi that ultimately prevailed, Kharoshthi dying out in the third or fourth century CE. The Devanagari used in modern India is derived from the ancient Brahmi script. Both Kharoshthi and Brahmi were syllabaries rather than alphabets, and so were cumbersome enough that only in certain professions did literacy become the norm.

It may be that experiments in Kharoshthi had begun in the fifth century BC, under stimuli from the Persian empire, but the earliest dateable examples of either Kharoshthi or Brahmi come from the century after Alexander. The inscriptions of King Ashoka (died 232 BC), in a Prakrit language similar to Pāli, are written in the Brahmi script, and some specialists believe that Ashoka and his ministers devised the script. The presence of literate Greeks in northwest India apparently made quite an impression: it was from the Greek language that Indians borrowed the words for "pen" and "papyrus." It is therefore reasonable to assume that in India the practice of reading and writing books began in the late fourth or the third century BC, in imitation of the

Hellenes. The literary tradition in India has been continuous ever since.

The Vedas themselves, however, were too sacred to be written down (or even to be heard by women or by lower-caste Indians), and continued to be transmitted orally. The priests and pandits to whom the Vedas were intrusted had all along done their best to preserve Vedic, the language in which the Rig-veda had been composed, but despite their efforts the language of the Rig-veda was by the late fourth century BC poorly understood. The language of the brahmins or priests in Alexander's time was classical Sanskrit, which can be seen (although not quite correctly) as a much evolved and much simplified descendant of Vedic. Even greater than the differences between classical Sanskrit and Vedic, however, were those that separated the priestly Sanskrit from the various Prakrits, or vernaculars. These were the everyday Indo-Aryan languages that had evolved in various regions of India. It was to safeguard the brahmins' language that the grammarian Panini composed his rules for Sanskrit, probably in the decades after Alexander's death.<sup>2</sup> Panini lived in Taksasila, the new city in which a Greek-speaking monarchy ruled for generations after Alexander's departure. Panini's rules stabilized the priestly language, and so defined "classical" Sanskrit. Even today a few Hindu religious teachers continue to write in classical Sanskrit.

Indian imperialism seems to have been inspired by Alexander, even though the first Indian empire appeared not in the Panjab but well to the east. In the region of Magadha, in what is now the state of Bihār, south of the central Ganges, Chandragupta Maurya created the first imperial state in the subcontinent. Chandragupta (died 298 BC) established his capital at Pataliputra, from which he and his successors in the Maurya dynasty conquered most of India and even parts of central Asia. Mauryan power crested in the middle of the third century BC, in the reign of Ashoka. We know something about Mauryan India because Seleukos sent an ambassador, Megasthenes, to Pataliputra several times, first under Chandragupta (Sandrakottos, in Greek) and then under his successor. Megasthenes wrote about his adventures and what he had seen in a four-book *Indika*, which combined detailed information with wild surmises. Although the *Indika* itself has not survived, we have extensive quotations and paraphrases of it in other Greek writers. Evidently the Mauryans had an almost totalitarian control of their kingdom. The products of fields, "factories," mines and forests all were taxed by the king, who depended upon an elaborate secret service as well as a professional army.

For our purposes Alexander's conquest of northwest India and the subsequent rise of a native Indian empire are of interest because of the religious consequences that flowed from the military and political events. In his rock inscriptions, the oldest examples of writing in any of the Indo-Aryan languages, Ashoka claims that after he had won a great war, enlarging the kingdom he had inherited, he was appalled by the suffering he had caused. As a result he converted to Buddhism and even became a monk. He remained king, however, and spent the rest of his reign and his resources promoting Buddhism. His inscriptions tell of his conversion and exhort his subjects to eschew violence and to heed the instruction of the Buddha. Thanks to Ashoka's efforts, Buddhism spread as far south as the island of Sri Lanka, and as far to the northwest as Afghanistan (ancient Bactria). In the 1960s more of Ashoka's moralizing inscriptions, these in Aramaic and in Greek, were found at Kandahar, in central Afghanistan. The eastward extension of Buddhism, to China and especially to southeast Asia, occurred later but would probably not have occurred at all had not Ashoka given Buddhism so pervasive a

presence in India. But the influence of religious traditions worked both ways, and at Ai Khanum, well to the north of Kandahar, a Hellene named Klearchos saw to it that an inscription was set up promulgating (in Greek) the ethical teachings of Pythian Apollo.

What archaeologists have found in India suggests that from the third century BC until the third century CE Buddhism was far and away the most vigorous and conspicuous religion in the subcontinent. Monasteries were built for the monks, in which they practiced the four cardinal virtues of Buddhism (pity and *ahimsa* for all living creatures, love, joy and serenity) and vowed themselves to chastity and poverty. For centuries the teachings of the Buddha, the rules that he established for his monastic order, and stories about the Buddha were orally transmitted. Eventually, however, they were committed to writing: according to the traditions passed down in Sri Lanka, the canon of Hinayana Buddhism was written down when King Vattagamani ruled the island (89-77 BC).<sup>3</sup>

Less important than Buddhism was Jainism. Ascetic Jainists, however, were probably the men who most deeply impressed Alexander, his troops, and the many hangers-on who accompanied him to the east. The Alexander-historians were fascinated by the “naked philosophers” (*gymnosophistai*) whom Alexander encountered in the Panjab. These gymnosophists renounced violence of all kinds, along with clothing and property. Through this renunciation the Jainists believed they would escape the transmigration of souls, and achieve permanent and absolute bliss (*nirvana*). A minor sect in the period before Alexander, the Jainists supposedly were bolstered when Chandragupta himself joined them. At the same time, however, a rift developed as some of the Jainists took to wearing white robes while the majority clung to their old tradition of nudity.

In large part classical Hinduism also was a product of the centuries after Alexander. Just as fundamentalist Christians suppose that their beliefs are the same as those of Jesus’ disciples, so devout Hindus today suppose that Hinduism has always been what it is now. Their religion - the true religion, as they see it - did not develop over time and was not a human creation. When human society first began, it is supposed, inspired seers or *rishis* “saw” the truth and spoke it, and what the *rishis* said has been faithfully transmitted ever since. Everything the *rishis* saw, in other words, is contained in the Vedic corpus. In the Hindu tradition chronology has no importance. The Muslim, Christian, and Jewish tradition has each its own charter-story and commemorates an event - whether historical or mythical - seen as the foundation of the tradition: the *hijra* of Muhammad, the birth of Jesus, and Moses’ reception of the Torah on Mt. Sinai (or God’s calling of Abraham). Hindus have nothing comparable, and find comfort in the belief that Hinduism has *always* been the religion of the pious. The efforts of Western historians, philologists and other critical scholars to find the stages of religious development in India, from the neolithic period onward, are regarded by devout Hindus as misguided: there were no stages of development, because In the Beginning the *rishis* expounded everything that Hindus believe today.

We have seen that the Vedic religion of the second and early first millennium BC was a sacrificial and theistic religion, the great gods rejoicing in the hymns of the Rig-veda that were sung at the sacrifices. That stage of Indian religion was followed, perhaps well after 1000 BC,

by a turning away from sacrifice and from the old Vedic gods. The Aranyakas and the Upanishads are expressions of this new understanding, which was not explicitly atheistic but can hardly be called theistic. The ferment in Indian religion perhaps was most intense in the sixth and fifth centuries BC, with the rise of Buddhism, Jainism and other sects, some theistic and others atheistic.

All along, however, there were strenuous efforts to harmonize the old Vedas with the new beliefs. This was not done by revising the Vedas - they were regarded as sacred and were scrupulously memorized and transmitted - but by providing explanations of the “real” meaning of the Vedas. Early efforts along this line resulted in the Brāhmanas, prose treatises attached to the poetic Vedas. The first of the Brāhmanas may have been composed in the ninth century BC.<sup>4</sup> After the rise of the atheistic sects ca. 500 BC it became necessary for Indians who treasured the old Vedas to show that the “traditional” religion was in all ways more satisfactory than the new heterodoxies. Classical Hinduism therefore arose in reaction to (and by defining itself against) Buddhism and Jainism. This process was evidently under way by the time of Alexander, but it became especially urgent in the third century BC, with the expansion of Jainism under Chandragupta and of Buddhism under Ashoka. It is important to note that both before and after Ashoka the various religious traditions in India were able “to get along” without violence. Ancient India knew nothing of the exclusiveness, often expressed in violence, that characterized Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

It was probably in the third or second century BC that the earlier stratum of the Bhagavad-gītā was composed. The Bhagavad-gītā, perhaps the most important expression of Hindu belief, is an eighteen-chapter religious excursus in the *Mahābhārata* (“Great Story”), a huge Sanskrit epic (90,000 stanzas, each of 32 syllables) about the chariot wars between the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The epic had apparently been sung by brāhmins for centuries as an entertaining story, without the Bhagavad-gītā. The 18 chapters are therefore a somewhat awkward interpolation into (and interruption of) the story, taking the form of a lengthy sermon that the charioteer Krishna delivers to the warrior Arjuna, just as the latter is about to take the field against the Kauravas. But the eighteen chapters of the Bhagavad-gītā are themselves not homogeneous. What A. L. Basham describes as the earlier stratum is focused on the individual’s identification and ultimate unification with the impersonal Brahman. There are no gods in this stratum, which seems to be a continuation and culmination of Upanishad doctrines. The later stratum, contrarily, is emphatically theistic, commanding worship of the gods and especially of Vishnu, the chief god. In this stratum Brahman itself is subordinated and presented as an emanation from Vishnu. What chronological indications we have suggest that this theistic stratum of the Bhagavad-gītā dates from the second or first century BC.

Because theism is an essential characteristic of Hinduism, the historian must see the third, second and first centuries BC as crucial for the development of Hinduism: it was then that a theistic tradition defined itself over against Buddhism. For a long time thereafter Buddhism and Hinduism coexisted comfortably in India, with Buddhism the dominant tradition until the third or fourth century CE. During this long period of Buddhist pacifism, unfortunately, much of northern India fell under the dominion of Sakai tribesmen from eastern Iran and central Asia. In the fourth century CE the Gupta dynasty rejected Buddhist pacifism in favor of the somewhat

more militant Hinduism (in Hindu tradition the *kshatriya* or “warrior” class is second only to the *brāhman* or priestly class in honor). Mustering a large army, the Gupta kings defeated the Sakai. Under Samudra Gupta (335-376 CE) the city of Pataliputra on the Ganges was a great imperial seat once again, after a lapse of five hundred years. It was then that Hinduism began its resurgence, eventually to become the paramount religion in India. The Hindu gods - Brahmā the creator, Vishnu the preserver, Shiva the destroyer - received the grateful worship of millions, and for the first time the people of India began to erect temples for their gods.<sup>5</sup>

## **The old Near Eastern cults**

The gods of the Near East were not much disturbed by either Alexander or the million or so Hellenes who moved into the new cities built in the Near East by the Diadochs. The gods here had seen empires come and go - the Assyrian, the Neo-Babylonian, the Persian - and were not especially concerned about the latest change of imperial masters. The Hellenes who took up residence in the Near East early in the Hellenistic period did not, as a rule, bring their gods with them. By the late fourth century BC the Greek gods had been losing credibility for a long time, and in the dozens of “Greek” cities built by the Diadochs only a few temples were erected for the Greek gods. Nominally polytheistic, the Hellenes were seldom averse to trying out new cults and to adding new and exotic gods to their pantheon. While the typical Greek immigrant had great affection for the Olympian gods in literature and on the stage, this affection was more nostalgia than religious attachment. For a moving religious experience the immigrants were likely to attend the rituals of the local Egyptian or Asiatic deities.

In contrast to Xerxes and a few of the later Persian kings, the Hellenistic monarchs went out of their way to patronize the native cults. As a result, during the Hellenistic and Roman periods the decline of the old cults of the Near East slowed and occasionally was even reversed. Alexander and the Diadochs found that royal gifts to the old gods were an effective means of securing the goodwill of their Asiatic and Egyptian subjects. The Seleukids generously supported cults of the Syrian goddess Atargatis and god Hadad, building for Atargatis a fine temple at Bambyke (Hierapolis). At Ur, Nippur and Babylon in Mesopotamia the old cults of Nannar, Enlil and Marduk revived in the third century BC, resulting in a brief and sudden spate of cuneiform tablets. It should be no surprise that these priestly texts portray the Seleukids as legitimate rulers, pleasing to the Mesopotamian gods. Much later the Severan emperors of Rome (193-235 CE) pumped new life into Baalbek, the sanctuary of Baal in the Beqa valley of Lebanon, giving it a grand set of temples and colonnades. As late as the fourth and fifth centuries CE we still hear of “pagan” priests at Edessa and Nisibis. The cult centers, in short, tended to be the hardiest of Near Eastern institutions.

The vitality of the traditional gods reminds us that despite the profound changes that were in progress, sacrificial cults and the old triad of temple, image and altar were still an important part of the Near Eastern landscape during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. It must be added, however, that for several cults part of their continuing attraction was their provision of ritual prostitution. As sacrifice lost its appeal, sex helped to keep the holy days popular. This was true, for example, at Baalbek, where carnival sex was big business long after the three deities worshiped there had ceased to be taken seriously. Late in the fourth century CE Christian

bishops were still denouncing the satanic temptations by which the old cults - especially those of Aphrodite, Atargatis, Baal, Asherah (Astarte), and the Great Mother - managed to keep their worshippers from converting to Christianity.

In Egypt the major gods - Ptah, Re and especially Amon - had been closely associated with the pharaohs. Thanks to that pharaonic connection the temples of these gods - at Memphis, Heliopolis, and Thebes, respectively - had grown to enormous size through the millennia of Egyptian autonomy. Egypt was no longer autonomous, however, and for these major gods the days of glory were drawing to a close. But while the "national" gods lost much of their luster in Persian, Ptolemaic and Roman times, the local gods (whose connections with the pharaohs had been looser) seem to have flourished for a very long time. Archaeological evidence indicates that many of the forty-two nome gods continued to be worshiped assiduously during the Hellenistic period and well beyond. These local cults - of Sobek in the Fayyum, Min at Coptos, Seth at Ombos, and many others - were important enough in the lives of Egyptian peasant-farmers (*fellahin*) that they long survived their credibility. In a typical nome stood fifteen or twenty villages, strung along the Nile's bank, and life for the peasants who lived in these villages was hard. The very best days of the villagers' month, the days to which all of the *fellahin* looked forward, were those set aside for one or another festival of the nome-god. On those holy days the peasants would trek to the nome-capital - for some of the villagers a walk of three or four hours - in order to enjoy the same festivals that their ancestors had been celebrating for millennia. Not surprisingly, the worship of the nome-gods continued unabated until the third and fourth centuries CE, when it was replaced by Christianity.

In Mesopotamia, Xerxes had ruined Esagila, the temple precinct of Marduk at Babylon, because it was so wealthy and powerful that it was able to instigate an anti-Persian revolt. On the other hand, the small and local temples and shrines were no threat at all, and they were allowed to continue unmolested. In the preceding chapter we noted the success of Mesopotamian Judaism, but even if 10% of the Mesopotamian population had Judaized by Alexander's time, the other 90% continued to find some satisfaction in traditional Mesopotamian cults.

Thanks to the writer Lucian, who was born to Aramaic-speaking parents and who became not only a Hellene but one of the most honored Greek writers and orators of the second century CE, we are particularly well informed about the cult of the goddess whom the Hellenes sometimes called Hera but more often called Atargatis (a Hellenized approximation of her Semitic name, which may have been Atar-ata). Atargatis shared a temple with her male companion, who was Hadad in Aramaic and Zeus in Greek, and whose image was that of a kindly, fatherly god. The temple, which was supposed to have been built by the gods just after the Great Flood, was located in Manbog ("spring," the Greek word for which was *Bambyke*), an otherwise insignificant town northeast of the large city of Aleppo. Queen Stratonike, wife of Seleukos I, was instructed by Atargatis in a dream to embellish the temple and did so, sparing no expenses. So spectacular did the place become that until Late Antiquity it was usually called Hierapolis, "the holy city." Inside the splendid temple the divine couple, Atargatis and Hadad, both of them made visible in golden images, sat enthroned: she on a pair of lions, and he on yoked bulls. Outside the temple was the altar on which priests (the temple reputedly employed

three hundred of them) in white robes made sacrifices to the divine couple, and beyond the altar was a wide courtyard in which worshipers assembled on festival days. The precinct also included an oracle, yet another statue-god, who miraculously moved about, sweated and occasionally spoke in answer to petitioners' questions. And of course the temple had on display the dedications made to Atargatis (Hadad/Zeus was little more than her consort) by grateful worshipers. Many a dedication was made in gratitude for Atargatis' help in bringing a woman and her baby safely through childbirth.

In Anatolia the old cults did very well in the Hellenistic period. Much of our information is provided by the geographer Strabo, who was born at Amaseia in northern Anatolia ca. 60 BC. Some of the Anatolian cults that had been aniconic, and had been situated in high places, seem to have come down to the plains by the Hellenistic period, and to have been converted to image-and-temple cults. At Komana in Cappadocia, for example, which today is Sar in the Adana province of Turkey, a Hurrian goddess Hapat had been worshiped as far back as written records reach. Until the Hellenistic period her cult was evidently aniconic but by the first century BC, when Strabo described it, the place was a huge establishment that we may loosely describe as a temple-state, even though it was not entirely autonomous.<sup>6</sup> The goddess Hapat had by this time become simply "Ma" to her worshipers, and she employed some six thousand temple servants. The high priest of Ma was the law at Komana and was de facto second in authority in all of Cappadocia. At Venasa, also in Cappadocia, was a smaller "temple-state," this one with three thousand servitors. The land owned by the deity, whom the Hellenes called Zeus, provided the high priest with annual revenues of fifteen talents. A second temple of Ma was situated in a second Komana, this one far to the north of Cappadocia, at what is today Tokat, near the Black Sea coast. At Pontic Komana the temple had grown rich from the revenues brought in by the temple prostitutes and Strabo says that business was especially brisk twice a year, when Ma made her "exodus" from the temple and crowds gathered from all over Pontos. On these occasions, according to Strabo (12.3.36), Pontic Komana was as disastrously expensive for lusty men as was Corinth, where merchants and soldiers alike squandered their savings and inspired the proverb, "Not every man should make a voyage to Corinth."

### **The Hellenes: the heyday of philosophy**

In their religious beliefs and activities the Hellenes after Alexander went in two different directions. In the city-state of the sixth and early fifth century BC almost all the citizens had shared beliefs and values. Their teachers were Homer, Hesiod and dramatic poets such as Aeschylus, whose tragedies were enacted in the theater and were seen and heard by rich and poor alike. After the advent of the sophists and the reading revolution, public performances of poetry were no longer the main source of wisdom for wealthy Hellenes. Instead, the *gnorimoi* ("knowledgeable") began to gather in private settings or in what we may call schools. In the wake of Sokrates' death several philosophical schools were established. In Cyrene Aristippos founded what was simply called the Cyrenaic school. In Athens Plato set up the Academy and Antisthenes the Cynic school. In the 330s BC Aristotle launched the Peripatetic school in his Lyceum. Athens gained two more schools ca. 300 BC: the Stoic and the Epicurean.

By the beginning of the third century BC philosophy had thus become an important part

of life for the *gnorimoi*, a privileged minority in every Greek city, and for these fortunate few religion was typically subordinate to philosophy. For *hoi polloi*, on the other hand, philosophy was not readily accessible. It demanded not only ample leisure but also fluent literacy. Because most of them had neither the time nor the literacy that was required, “the many and the poor” were left to satisfy themselves as best they could with the traditional civic cults, however obsolescent these cults may have seemed, and with the newer mystery cults. Before glancing at the various Greek cults, we must first look at the philosophical schools. We have already seen (in Chapter Five) the early vigor and then the decline of the Lyceum, which focused steadily on the perceptible world and did not much concern itself with metaphysics. In contrast, the Academic, Stoic and Epicurean schools devoted much of their energies either to advocating or to attacking what moderns would describe as religious beliefs.

### **The Old and Middle Academy**

During the first fifty years of the Hellenistic period the Academy (Ακαδημία), Plato's foundation, followed along the lines set by the founder. Although this “Old Academy” continued to make progress in astronomy and mathematics, most of its effort seems to have centered on promoting and defending doctrines not susceptible to scholarship.<sup>7</sup> Speusippos (Plato's nephew) and subsequent scholars in the Old Academy continued to insist, as had Plato, on the reality of the abstract “forms” (or “ideas”) and on the unreality of the perceptible world. They promoted the Sokratic understanding of virtue, confidently described the nature of the soul, and repeated Plato's warnings about the punishments that would be visited upon corrupt souls in the Afterlife.

These Platonic doctrines had come under attack already by Aristotle, who denied the reality of the “forms” on which Plato's entire system rested. The Epicureans and Stoics likewise dismissed the “forms,” declaring that the only reality was physical. Even within the Academy Plato's metaphysical speculation had begun to look somewhat suspect by ca. 260 BC, when Arkesilas assumed the position of scholar. Under Arkesilas' direction the Academy entered its skeptical Middle period. The main target of Arkesilas' skepticism, however, was not the Academy's illustrious founder but its main rival: the Stoic school. The Stoic belief that the universe was an intelligent organism depended upon a very vulnerable theory of knowledge, and Arkesilas insisted that the Stoics did not really know what they were talking about. Once launched, Arkesilas' skepticism was applied not only to the Stoic (and Epicurean) dogmas, but also to those of Plato. A thoroughgoing agnostic, Arkesilas denied that any of us can have any knowledge of the soul, the gods, the Afterlife, or anything else beyond the physical world. The name “Skeptics” soon became a synonym for the adherents of the Middle Academy. They enjoyed debating all dogmatists, who claimed to know what - so far as the Skeptics could see - was beyond human capacity to know. The Middle Academy reached its most extreme agnosticism ca. 150 BC, under Karneades, a brilliant dialectician who specialized in skewering the ponderous dogmas of the Stoic Chrysippos.

### **Epicureanism and Stoicism**

Shortly before 300 BC Epicurus, a wealthy and well-read Athenian, opened his famous

garden for gatherings of his friends and students, and began presenting to them his understanding of what the world was, and how they should conduct themselves in it. Epicurus also wrote extensively, his magnum opus being a 37-volume treatise entitled *Peri physeos* ("On Nature"). Very little of what he wrote survives. A younger contemporary of Epicurus was Zeno of Kition, a city in Cyprus. As a young man Zeno had come to Athens (almost drowning when his ship wrecked off Piraeus) in order to study philosophy. For several years he divided his time between the Academy and the diatribes of Krates the Cynic, but about 300 BC Zeno began to give his own lectures, in a public portico called the Painted Stoa, whence came the "Stoic" name. Zeno too was a tireless writer. Dozens of his books are known by their titles, but all of the books had been lost by Late Antiquity.

Epicureanism and Stoicism attracted many adherents from the educated class, and remained important for centuries. They are conventionally called philosophies, and the label is apt. Epicureanism and Stoicism each included what had - after Sokrates - become the three essential parts of philosophy: epistemology (how we can know anything), physics (what the material world is), and ethics (how we should live). Because the third component of Epicureanism and Stoicism was more important than either the epistemological or the physical, they may also be called ethical systems. Both Epicureanism and Stoicism aimed to help educated Hellenes to make sense of - and to accept - a world that looked very different from the one in which their parents had grown up. The conquests of Alexander and the establishment of the great Hellenistic monarchies had reduced the Greek city-states to political insignificance. Even so great a city as Athens was now dwarfed by the imperial kingdoms of the Seleukids, Ptolemies and Antigonids. The virtues of earlier generations had been tied to political and military *aretē* ("excellence"), but in a world of monarchies and professional armies those virtues had little relevance for the average man.

The success of Epicureanism and Stoicism also owed much to the arrival of astrology in the Greek world. During the fourth century BC astrologers in Babylon had succeeded in plotting the cycles of all five of the visible planets - Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus and Saturn - and so were able to predict the position of the sun, moon and the planets in the twelve zodiacal constellations. Many horoscopes inscribed in Akkadian cuneiform on clay tablets have been found by archaeologists at Mesopotamian sites, and the earliest such tablets thus far discovered date ca. 300 BC.<sup>8</sup> The Hellenes had begun to hear about the "science" of astrology as early as ca. 350 BC, and Alexander's conquest of Mesopotamia quickened its spread. Even Alexander's death at Babylon, on June 10 of 323 BC, added to the momentum of astrology, because the rumor soon got around that the conqueror's death had been foreseen and foretold by the uncanny "Chaldaean" astrologers of Bel Marduk. An extended advertisement of the powers of astrology was the *Babyloniaka*, published ca. 275 BC by Berossos, a Babylonian priest of Bel Marduk. Although his native language was Aramaic and although he could read Akkadian cuneiform, Berossos wrote in Greek for a Greek public. His treatise gave a brief "history" (mostly a list of kings) of Babylonia, but was essentially an explanation and justification of horoscopic astrology. For many Hellenes, the ethnonym "Chaldaean" became a synonym for "astrologer." The astrologers claimed that a person's destiny in life was formed by the stars - the zodiacal constellation - under which the person was born.

Epicurus' response was that all of this was nonsense. The world, Epicurus taught, was entirely material: matter is a coalescence of atoms, and physical events such as lightning, drought, tides and earthquakes are the result of purely physical forces. Neither stars nor gods control the material world, and there is no such thing as destiny or fate. In a purely material world, Epicureans ought to avoid pain and find what pleasure they can. Death is the end of us: we have no immortal soul. Epicurus did not deny the existence of the gods, but insisted that they had neither any control over events nor even any knowledge of them. The Epicurean gods were corporeal beings, filmy entities composed of the finest of atoms, in no need of worship and in fact not worth bothering about. Epicurus could have omitted the gods altogether had not his epistemology required them.<sup>9</sup>

At his death Epicurus gave "the Garden" to his followers, and the place continued as a seminary for Epicureans until the Roman period. Although administrators headed the school, they seldom added to or altered the Founder's teachings, which soon acquired almost scriptural authority. The Academy and the Stoa went through Early, Middle and Late phases, but the Epicureans maintained their doctrine relatively unchanged for over five hundred years. One of the more notable Epicurean philosophers was Philodemus of Gadara (ca. 110-40 BC), who fled to Rome when Gadara was taken over by Jannaeus Alexander, king of Judaea, and Jannaeus proceeded to circumcise and Judaize the Gentile males of Gadara. With the arrival of Philodemus in Italy, Epicureanism enjoyed a brief vogue among eminent Romans. Among these were two dictators - Sulla and Julius Caesar - along with Lucius Calpurnius Piso, who was Caesar's father-in-law. A villa built by Piso at Herculaneum was covered by the lava flow when Mt. Vesuvius erupted in 79 CE. Buried with the villa was its extensive library, which contained many of the works of Philodemus. These were all in Greek, but Latin versions of Epicureanism were also available. Early in the first century BC a certain C. Amafinius had written several Epicurean tracts in Latin, not highly regarded by Cicero. Cicero had a higher opinion of Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, which ca. 55 BC he read in draft as a favor to the poet. The *De rerum natura* translated Epicureanism into Latin dactylic hexameters. Lucretius wrote the *De rerum natura*, so he claimed, in order to free Romans from fears of the Afterlife.

## **Religious aspects of Stoicism**

Like Epicureanism, Stoicism was thoroughly materialist, and Zeno posited nothing that the public would describe as supernatural. The Olympian gods, so Zeno believed, were not to be taken literally but were personalized versions of abstract values. The old myths were literally absurd, but were of some value if understood allegorically. Thus Aphrodite was love and sex, Demeter was grain and fertility, Dionysos was wine and frivolity. In traditional Greek fashion the Stoic also found meaning in names, deriving the gods' essence from words that sounded - ding-a-ling - something like the names. So the god Kronos was in essence *chronos*, or time, and Hera was *aer* or air.<sup>10</sup> By allegorizing the old gods, the Stoics managed to salvage at least some parts of the old tradition. It was not at all uncommon for a Stoic sage to participate in the old rituals of the Olympian gods.

In keeping with his materialism, Zeno was in awe of the universe, its majesty, its complexity, and above all its order. He was fully aware of what the Babylonian astrologers had

accomplished, and he believed - as they did - that a person's lot in life is determined by the astrological sign under which the person is born. More importantly, the regularity and "order" of the planetary movements persuaded Zeno that the entire universe is an intelligible and an intelligent organism.

The Stoics made a large contribution to shaping "the philosophers' God". Zeno taught that because the universe is a living organism, it has a soul that is synonymous with pure intellect or reason. Stoics sometimes referred to the World-Soul as *logos*, and sometimes as *pronoia* or (in Latin) *providentia*, terms which mean "knowing in advance." The World-Soul consists, so Zeno speculated, of "creative fire" (*pur technikon*), the finest and most rarefied of all substances. From this same fine and fiery substance come all of our individual souls. When we die, our souls dissolve into the all-encompassing World-Soul. In a world in which everything happens because *pronoia* predestined it to happen, most externals are obviously beyond our control. Where and to what parents we are born, what sort of physical gifts we have or lack, what accidents befall us - all these things are foreordained and therefore "irrelevant" to the Stoic sage. What we do control are the *internals*. Our character, our actions, and our morality are all up to us. Because my own *logos* is connected to the *aither* of the stars and to the *logos* of the entire universe, I would do best to comply with the principles by which the providential cosmos maintains itself. No matter the role that the stars have assigned us, we can play our part with absolute honor and integrity. The individual's lot is at any rate of no importance, since at death our *pneumata* will be released from our bodies and will rejoin the *aither*, the fiery World-Soul from which they came. Since the World-Soul can not be cajoled by prayers to cure a person's pains and infirmities, the Stoic was free to leave this life through suicide. Both Zeno and his successor, Kleanthes, hastened their own deaths by abstaining from food, Kleanthes when at the age of ninety-nine he was afflicted with a tumor on the lip.

## **Toward the philosophers' God**

Although the World-Soul as envisaged by Zeno was not at all a personal God, it moved toward that description under Kleanthes, who succeeded Zeno and headed the Stoic school from 263 to 231 BC. Kleanthes' *Hymn to Zeus* recycled the old Olympian as the new Stoic World-Soul, making a somewhat impersonal "Zeus" the source of the universe and the source of all *logos*. The Stoics were therefore pioneers of natural theology. In opposition to the Epicureans, Zeno and Kleanthes insisted that the beauty, durability, and especially the order of the material world can not be explained without reference to a pre-existent creative force. The divine origin of the cosmos was of course not a new idea: all of the old religions assumed that the world was divinely created and maintained. What was new with the Stoics was the basis for the idea. While the old religions had relied on intuition, myth, and sacred texts, the natural theology of the Stoics was ostensibly based on their epistemology and physics. The existence of Providence, then, was presented as a rational conclusion. Stoicism had no liturgy, no priests, and no revealed texts. Unlike the personal and anthropopathic God of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim traditions, the Stoics' World-Soul had no emotions, required no worship, and was immanent throughout the physical world. The fiery World-*logos* of the Stoics, however, anticipated some of the most important aspects of God in the scriptural religions: it was eternal, it determined everything that happened within the cosmos, and it was occasionally referred to as

*ho theos*, which may be translated as “God.”

For Zeno, Kleanthes and later philosophers the old Olympian gods became either irrelevant or a nuisance and an embarrassment, but the philosophers did not take it upon themselves to disprove or even challenge the gods’ existence. When Chrysippos, who headed the Stoic school late in the third century BC, wrote theology the title of his work was not “The Nature of God,” but *The Nature of the Gods*. The same title - *On the Nature of the Gods* - was chosen by Cicero for the three books on the subject that he wrote ca. 45 BC. We may suppose that in such a philosophical work one of the main questions should have been, Is there one God, or are there many gods? But in Cicero’s essay, as apparently in Chrysippos’, that question was not even raised. Epictetus, who taught his Stoic philosophy ca. 100 CE, seems to have thought monotheistically.<sup>11</sup> In his discourses, however, he alternated easily between “the god” (or “Zeus”) and “the gods.” As late as the 160s and 170s CE, Marcus Aurelius spoke instinctively of “the gods” when referring to deity or Providence.

Despite the Greek (and Roman) philosophers’ consistent deference to traditional Greco-Roman polytheism, from Zeno onward they increasingly - with the notable exception of the Epicureans - subscribed to what we may call a philosophical monotheism. By the third century CE virtually all philosophers assumed that the universe had been designed by, and was controlled by, a single divine power.<sup>12</sup> Christianity, as we shall see, extinguished polytheism in the Roman empire. But Greek philosophy, especially as it evolved in the seven centuries from Aristotle to Proclus, provided the crucial intellectual support for the victory of God over the gods.

### **Euhemerism and the Hellenes’ ignorance of the distant past: an essay**

Educated Hellenes’ interest in philosophy must be contrasted with their general indifference to most of human history. A strange idea that began circulating among the *gnorimoi* at the end of the fourth century BC was that the Olympian gods had actually been mortal men and women, who had lived a very long time ago and who - because of their impressive accomplishments - had been deified by their contemporaries. The idea seems to have originated with a history of Egypt written ca. 300 BC by Hekataios of Abdera. The priests of the Re temple at On (a place that the Hellenes called Heliopolis, just north of Cairo), believed that the very first four kings of Egypt were the gods Re, Ptah, Geb and Shu, each of whom ruled for a thousand years. When Hekataios visited the temple the priests gave him a Greek translation of this tradition, telling him that the first of the pharaohs were Helios (Re), Hephaistos (Ptah), Kronos (Geb), and Zeus (Shu).<sup>13</sup> Knowing that the Egyptians regarded all of their pharaohs as gods, Hekataios made the reasonable deduction that these first pharaohs too were deified mortals. The deification of rulers was quite familiar to Hellenes in the Hellenistic period, and not only from their contact with Egyptians. In 324 BC Alexander had demanded that the Hellenes declare him to be a god, and the city-states of Greece and the Anatolian coast proceeded to pass decrees to that effect, although with some grouching and sarcasm. Sacrifices to Alexander and games in his honor were supervised by the Diadochs, some of whom became gods themselves. Because the Egyptians traditionally regarded their ruler as a god, Ptolemy Soter was happy to accept divine honors from them, as were all of his descendants. The Seleukids were not so

brazen, and refrained from accepting worship while still alive. At death, however, the Seleukid monarchs too were deified.

Hekataios of Abdera's "discovery" that the earliest Egyptian pharaohs had become the gods famous in Greek tradition was carried a step further by Euhemerus of Messene, a younger contemporary of Hekataios.<sup>14</sup> Euhemerus offered his readers what he claimed was a factual history of the Olympian gods, but while Hekataios was a serious writer Euhemerus was a charlatan. Claiming that his information came from an inscription discovered on an island in the Indian ocean, Euhemerus explained that Zeus had been a world conqueror, much like Alexander the Great. Dionysos was something of a Johnny Grapeseed, who had spread vineyards and viticulture to all parts of the world. Hephaistos was of course the inventor of metallurgy, Aphrodite the madame of an extraordinary brothel, and so on.

The success of Euhemerism is remarkable and sobering. In the second century BC the most distinguished Roman poet of his day, Quintus Ennius, wrote a Latin version of Euhemerus' fantasy, and all through antiquity the Euhemerist explanation of the Olympians continued to be taken quite seriously. The success of Euhemerus' fiction is a stark illustration of the gullibility of the ancient Hellenes, no matter how educated, when confronted by inventions about the remote past. In fact we may generalize that discovering what had actually happened in the remote past was something that the Hellenes rarely attempted and never achieved. Hekataios of Abdera was unusual in his earnest attempt to learn something about the distant past, but for his information he was necessarily at the mercy of the Egyptian priests. Most Greek historians dealt with the history of their own times, and not with what had happened long ago. The word *historia* meant, literally, "inquiry," and the Greek historian was at his best in tracking down eye-witnesses and participants, getting their stories, and then composing a history of the very recent past. Thucydides and Polybios are outstanding examples of the Greek historian's craft and critical ability. The negative side of all this was that "contemporary" history is virtually all that a Greek historian did. To investigate and reconstruct the distant past, for which there were no eye-witnesses or participants to whom the historian could address his inquiries, was not something on which serious historians (with rare exceptions, such as Hekataios) spent their time.

For most Hellenes the remote past was the province of Homer, Hesiod and other poets and myth-tellers. Although they knew that the myths were untrue and that even Homer's epics were not entirely reliable, the Hellenes enjoyed these stories, took pride in being able to retell them, and did not appreciate the spoilsport who pointed out how implausible they were. Hellenes acknowledged that barbarians such as the Egyptians and Mesopotamians had records - evidently reliable - that reached much farther back into the past than the Trojan War. It was because he respected "alien wisdom" more than the Greeks' own stories that Hekataios was eager to learn what the priests of Re could tell him about the most remote past, and then tried to make sense out of what the priests reported. But Hekataios and most other Hellenes were reluctant to learn any of the "barbarian" languages, and so far as we know no Hellene ever managed to acquire from Egyptian priests or from "the Chaldaeans" the ability to read the Egyptian hieroglyphs or the cuneiform script in which Akkadian had been written for two thousand years. Nor, of course, did the Hellenes do archaeology. It was a Judaeian and then a Christian idea that what had actually happened in the remote past, beginning with the very creation of the world, not

only *could* be known but indeed *was* known: it was all there in the Bible, written by Moses and the prophets. The Biblical picture of the past was accepted until the Enlightenment, when it was replaced by a critical study of history. That replacement was part of the transition from Christendom to the modern world and we may therefore say that trying to establish what actually happened in the distant past is an essential ingredient of modernity.

Because critical history for the Hellenes was limited to the historian's own lifetime, even well educated Hellenes were capable of believing wild inventions about the distant past. Plato's myth about Atlantis is a case in point: we may presume that Plato himself did not believe the story he told, but he claimed that it was based on Egyptian records and his readers could not imagine any way in which they could verify or falsify Plato's assertion. In Greco-Roman antiquity an author's "authority" was formidable, especially if the author wrote in prose (poets were assumed to have exercised their license to manipulate the truth to their own ends). For these and other reasons the fiction that we call Euhemerism had surprising success in the Hellenistic world. Even fluent readers who described themselves as Stoics or Epicureans had inadequate defense against Euhemerism and other quacks who claimed to have new information about the remote past.

### **Religion among the Hellenes in the Hellenistic and early Roman periods**

While the philosophical Hellene was trying to figure out what to do with the Olympian gods, other Hellenes continued to worship them. Although belief in the Olympians had shriveled, in the Aegean the external shell of the old religion was to persist for another seven hundred years. The civic cults, centered on animal sacrifice paid for by the state, still reassured at least some of the citizens that all was well. The festivals continued to be held, and in the typical Aegean polis children memorized hymns to the venerable gods of the city. Tradition has a charm of its own, and people found some pleasure in doing the things that had been done ever since the city's foundation in Heroic times. When Pausanias the traveler made his pilgrimage to Greece in the second century CE, intent on visiting all of the places at which the gods and Heroes of old had been worshiped, he found many of them derelict and almost abandoned. But a few were still thriving and dozens more were still in business, drawing at least a small band of worshippers.

To look to these old gods and Heroes for help, on the other hand, was plain folly. Even the mightiest of them were signally unable to protect even their own treasuries at Delphi and Olympia and other temple-sites: Nabis of Sparta and then Roman proconsuls plundered the Greek sanctuaries, taking the dedications of gold and silver in order to replenish their war-chests. Residents on the Greek mainland and on the islands of the Aegean who were especially dubious of the civic gods formed clubs or associations for the purpose of establishing for themselves one or more of the new "mystery" cults - cults, that is, that were not supported by the polis but by the initiates (the *mystai*). Devotees of Isis, Sarapis, Atargatis, and the Judaeian Adonai typically purchased a house or some other small establishment at which to meet, enjoy each other's fellowship, and worship their deity.

It was widely supposed in Hellenistic Greece that the deity in charge of human life was

*tychē*, a word which meant Luck, or Fortune. Unlike republics, monarchies are conspicuously vulnerable to Chance. An assassin's knife, a sudden fever, or even an amphora tipped from a third-story window can plunge a kingdom into chaos. The fortunes of war were equally unpredictable, and time after time in the generation after Alexander scores of cities knew that their fate would be decided in an afternoon's encounter between two huge professional armies. Men and women who refused to admit that human events are simply the result of blind chance or luck spoke instead of Tyche as a goddess, powerful and unpredictable. In various cities a statue of Tyche was erected and received cultic offerings from anxious individuals.

The traditional Greek gods who fared best in the Hellenistic period were personal rather than civic deities. As the god of healing, Asklepios heard and answered the prayers and vows of many Hellenes who suffered from dreadful diseases or had been seriously injured or wounded. Between the late fifth and the third centuries BC some two hundred cities seem to have added a cult of Asklepios.<sup>15</sup> The incubation hall at Epidauros was festooned with numerous testimonials to the miraculous powers of Asklepios. Inscriptions inform us that the blind Hermon of Thasos was given sight by the god; that Kleimenes of Argos, immobile from paralysis, was made to walk; and that dozens of others who visited the sanctuary were cured of their various ailments. A more specialized "helper" was Hera, who helped pregnant women through the pains and dangers of childbirth. Most popular of all were Demeter and Dionysos, both of whom offered their initiates a blissful Afterlife. Demeter's cult was centered at Eleusis, near Athens, and wealthy men and women from all over the Greek world made it a point to journey to Eleusis at least once in a lifetime, to celebrate the nocturnal Mysteries in the great hall. Central here was the myth of Persephone, daughter of Demeter, who was taken to the Underworld by the god Hades but was allowed to return to this life for six months of every year. Persephone's partial escape from Hades promised to the initiates into Demeter's cult that they too would not be held forever in Hades.

Dionysos had no such central sanctuary as Eleusis, but was worshiped by semi-secret societies in many cities. Because Dionysos had himself been killed and brought back to life, his credentials as a helper in the Afterlife were impressive. The "Bacchants" who were initiated into Dionysos' cult met at night, roamed the countryside, and with the help of music, wine and sexual stimulation worked themselves into a frenzy or ecstasy. Occasionally the Bacchants' "orgies" (*orgia*) ended in bloodshed, and because of some such excess by the Bacchants of Rome the Roman senate in 186 BC tried to suppress the cult among Roman citizens, or at least to inhibit its more dangerous aspects.

As we have seen, the new cities of the Hellenistic period had relatively few temples for the Olympian gods. In the Archaic period the colonial cities in Sicily and southern Italy had been famous for their temples to Hera, Apollo, Zeus and the rest; but the colonial cities founded by Alexander and the Diadochs spent their energies on other projects. The several hundred thousand Hellenes who left the Aegean to live in Egypt, Anatolia and the Fertile Crescent retained a fondness for the Olympians - one could scarcely consider oneself a Hellene without at least paying lip service to these gods - but seldom took the old gods seriously enough to build temples for them in their new surroundings. It was one thing to read about the gods in Homer and Hesiod, and another thing to spend a great sum of money in order to build houses for them.

A substitute for the Olympians was the royal cult, paid for by the Ptolemies and the Seleukids. At the festivals for a deified king there were sacrifices, musical performances and much pageantry, and in his credibility as a god a dead king was not far behind most of the Olympians. After ca. 150 BC these royal cults fell on hard times, as the shadow of Rome increasingly fell over the eastern Mediterranean. With the collapse of the Roman Republic, however, and the establishment of the Principate by Caesar Augustus, an entirely new set of gods became available. The imperial cult - first for Julius Caesar, then for Augustus, Tiberius, and their relatively respectable successors - was much more popular in the Greek east than in the Latin west.

### **The “oriental” mystery cults of Sarapis, Isis and Mithras**

Many Hellenes were attracted to the gods of the Egyptians and Asiatics. Since these gods were unencumbered by the *mythoi* of Greek poets and were taken quite seriously by the local population, the immigrant Hellenes frequently joined in their worship. In one of Theokritos' poems we hear the chatter of two women of Alexandria as they prepare to attend the Adonis festival put on by Queen Arsinoe. Adonis is simply a Hellenization of the Syrian god Adon. Usually the Hellenes equated the local god with a familiar name from the Greek pantheon. So the Baalat of Baalbek became Aphrodite of Syrian Heliopolis, just as Ba'al himself was identified with Helios, but the rituals which the Hellenes learned at Baalbek had been performed by Syrians for a thousand years. Most popular were the "listener gods" and "helper gods," such as the Syrians' Atargatis, discussed above. Hellenes who visited Syria became acquainted with the goddess at Hieropolis /Bambyke, and on their return home some of them set up private sanctuaries - mystery cults - for her. An inscription shows that by 127 BC Atargatis was worshiped on Apollo's own island of Delos.

The Ptolemies used religion to further their political interests, and toward that end redesigned an old Egyptian cult along lines intended to appeal to both Hellenes and Egyptians. This was the mystery cult of Sarapis. The name was a combination of Osiris and Apis: near Saqqara, adjacent to Memphis and at the point that the Nile valley begins to broaden out into the Delta, was a temple to Osiris-Apis, a deity in whom were amalgamated both the anthropomorphic god Osiris and the Apis bull. According to the Egyptian myth, Osiris had been killed by Seth, god of the eastern Delta, but was brought back to life when Isis, Osiris' sister-wife, gathered all the severed members of his body and put them back together. Osiris thereupon became the god of the Underworld. Ptolemy I Soter saw the potential appeal of this cult, if it were suitably Hellenized. To that project he appointed Timotheus and Manetho: Timotheus was a priest of Demeter at Eleusis, and Manetho (fluent in both Egyptian and Greek) was a priest of Ptah at Memphis. The Sarapis whom this committee produced was a thoroughly anthropomorphic deity. The Apis bull, whom Egyptians venerated, was incorporated into the name *Sarapis*, but because Hellenes had no interest in worshiping animals the bull was visually eliminated from the new cult.

For those who were initiated into his mysteries, Sarapis was a god of healing, of bounty, and of the Afterlife, a realm in which he had special expertise. At Alexandria a splendid

Serapeum<sup>16</sup> was built for him, and Ptolemy commissioned Bryaxis, perhaps the most famous sculptor in the early third century BC, to make a statue of the god. The face that Bryaxis gave to Sarapis was that of a bearded, fatherly man, with more than a passing resemblance to Zeus. The image became famous, and in the Roman period it was reproduced often in paintings and statuary. With royal support, Sarapis' cult spread quickly in the Greek lands over which the Ptolemies exercised some control. These included the Aegean islands, because the Ptolemaic fleet was the largest in the Mediterranean. A small Serapeum was built on Delos, home of Apollo and Artemis, and with Ptolemaic patronage another was built at Delphi, another of Apollo's famous centers. Sarapis was from early on a god of healing, and a rival to Asklepios. As such, he was the recipient of prayers from kings and commoners (Demetrios of Phaleron, who helped set up the royal library in Alexandria, claimed that Sarapis miraculously restored his vision). Unfortunately for Sarapis, his cult was always dependent on the Ptolemies' largesse, and although it flourished in the third and second centuries BC it lost ground as the Ptolemies' political power shrank. After Cleopatra was defeated at Actium in 31 BC the cult of Sarapis was for the most part restricted to Egypt and more particularly to Alexandria.

Isis, Sarapis' sister and wife, had more popular appeal and more durability than he had. Her image, often holding her baby Harpokras, influenced Christian representations of the Virgin Mary with the Christ-child. Although Isis was initially worshiped alongside her brother/husband in Serapea, she eventually had her own temples and long outlasted the Ptolemaic kingdom. When Vesuvius covered Pompeii in 79 CE, the temple of Isis was the city's most active sanctuary. The emperor Domitian was a devotee of Isis, and in the second century CE, by which time the Olympians were moribund, Isis was perhaps the most popular deity in the Mediterranean world. Her credentials as a savior in the Afterlife were even better than those of Sarapis, and like him she was regarded as a helper in this earthly life. Either in Serapea or in her own temples she received daily cult. This did not consist of animal sacrifices but of hymns, prayers and other rituals. One was initiated into the cult by baptism with water brought from the Nile, and after initiation the worshiper was required to live according to relatively strict moral precepts (at death, the soul was interrogated by Anubis, who had a list of forty-two commandments that the righteous were to have kept).

The last of the oriental mystery cults to emerge in the Greco-Roman world was Mithraism. In many respects Mithraism was more like a full-blown religion than like a polytheistic cult. If you were a Mithraic initiate, that is, you had no need for any of the other cults in your community: Mithras assisted you in all aspects of your life, and at death brought you safely to the Seventh Heaven. Mithraism was an offshoot of the Mazdian cult in Iran and eastern Anatolia, and Mithras himself was a Hellenized version of Mitra, a god of contracts who had been worshiped by Aryans at least since the second millennium BC. His mystery cult, however, was not produced until the first century CE. In the 70s CE, and perhaps at Rome itself,<sup>17</sup> the old sacrificial cult was completely revamped. The transformed version was a dualistic mystery religion. Mithraism featured a rigorous initiation (divided into seven phases), baptism, some asceticism, and an emphasis on the Afterlife.<sup>18</sup> Its great vogue, as we shall see in Chapter 15, was in the second and third centuries CE.

## **Ignoring Heaven and Hell**

Although the mystery cults of Sarapis, Isis and Mithras were among the most interesting religious developments of the Hellenistic and early Roman imperial periods, they are interesting especially because they are harbingers of something new. Most Hellenes and Romans continued to frequent the old civic cults, and to pay little attention to the Afterlife. As we have seen, Plato included in his *Republic* and *Phaedo* vivid myths of what the unjust soul suffers after death. But for a long time these descriptions received little attention. During the century and a half of what in this book is called the Middle Academy, from the early third to the end of the second century BC,<sup>19</sup> skepticism reigned in the Academy and Plato's myths about Hades were mostly ignored. Although in the general population of Hellenes and Romans the belief in Hell seems to have grown during the Hellenistic period, it did not become a great concern before the third century CE.

Epitaphs from the earlier centuries usually express neither hope nor fear about the Afterlife. Most Latin tombstones are inscribed only with the name of the deceased and the apotropaic "D M" (a routine appeal to the *dis manibus*, the gods of the Underworld). If a tombstone has more to say, it typically reminds the readers that sooner or later they too will die:

Oh you, you who pass by! What you are, I once was. What I am, you will be.<sup>20</sup>

Such epitaphs fall under the general category of *memento mori* ("remember that you too must die!") warnings. Other epitaphs express the deep grief of the deceased's survivors. Here for example, parents mourn the death of their child:

The flower of youth lies buried below this stone.  
Would that the spirit could be brought back,  
To know how great is our grief.<sup>21</sup>

Yet other epitaphs advise the living to enjoy life while they still can:

The baths, the wine, and Venus wear out our bodies. But what would life be without the baths, the wine, and Venus!<sup>22</sup>

In their indifference to the Afterlife, these inscriptions are a reminder that although the mystery cults were vital and growing during the Hellenistic period and the early imperial period of Rome, for many people (and perhaps for most) the present life was all that there was.

Although Plato's myths were not taken very seriously by most Hellenes and Romans, they found a more receptive audience elsewhere. As we shall see in Chapter Seven, the Judaeo author of I Enoch, probably in the early second century BC, seems to have been inspired by the *Phaedo* as he composed his own fantasy of eternal torment. From the Enoch literature and other apocryphal books the picture of Hell made its way into Hellenistic Judaism and then - for a time - to rabbinic Judaism and more permanently to Christianity and Islam.

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1. On these see Salomon 1996, pp. 373-83.
  2. Basham 1967, p. 388.
  3. Basham 1967, p. 266 (but at p. 263 Basham notes the possibility that parts of the canon were written down as early as Ashoka's reign).
  4. Basham 1989, p. 30.
  5. On all this see Basham 1967, pp. 63 ff., and Basham 1989, pp. 83-97.
  6. Strabo 11.12.2 and 12.2.3.
  7. The successive *scholarchs* of the Old Academy were Speusippos, Xenokrates of Chalcedon, Polemon, and Krates. For a survey of their teachings see Dillon 2003.
  8. Francesca Rochberg has argued (Rochberg 2004) that true horoscopy began in Mesopotamia only ca. 300 BC. The earliest known archive of cuneiform tablets with horoscopes dates to the years 298-269 BC. A few "horoscopic" tablets dating as early as 410 BC have been found at Babylon and Nippur, but these predictions are based on celestial omens (eclipses, planetary conjunctions, and other ominous events) and not on the position of all five planets in relation to the sun and moon. The pseudo-science of astrology appears to have evolved dramatically between 410 and 298 BC.
  9. The Epicureans believed that when we picture an object in our minds we are actually perceiving an image (consisting of the very finest atoms) that has radiated from the object itself. Because people could in their minds picture aniconic as well as iconic gods, and see them in dreams, the Epicureans felt compelled to concede the existence of all these gods.
  10. Peters 1970, p. 453.
  11. On Epictetus and the centrality in his thought of something similar to what we may call "God" see Long 2002.
  12. Frede makes the point in reference to the *Octavius* of Minucius Felix, in which the Christian Octavius argues for monotheism against Caecilius' polytheism: "Platonists, Peripatetics, and Stoics all took the position Octavius tries to persuade Caecilius of, namely that there is one God who providentially governs the universe" (Frede 1999, p. 43).
  13. Drews 1973, p. 128-30.
  14. No general study of Euhemerus and his influence is available in English. Those who read German can consult M. Winiarczyk, *Euhemerus von Messene. Leben, Werk und Nachwirkung. Beiträge zur Altertumskunde, Band 157*. München/Leipzig: K.G. Saur, 2002.

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15. Wickkiser 2008, p. 37.

16. The Latin spelling of the god's name was *Serapis*, and in Latin the god's temple was a *Serapeum*. For the temple, the Latin spelling is conventionally transliterated into English.

17. Roger Beck, "The Mysteries of Mithras: A New Account of their Genesis," *JRS* 88 (1998), pp. 115-128, makes a good argument that the Mithraic mysteries were elaborated by aristocrats from Commagene after their land was annexed by Vespasian (in 72 CE) and attached to the province of Syria. Mithras had long been worshiped in Commagene but there he was not, so far as inscriptional evidence shows, the savior figure that he became in Roman Mithraism. Beck suggests that the person who contributed most to fashioning the new religion may have been Tiberius Claudius Balbillus, who was Rome's leading astrologer in the 70s and was also connected by marriage to what until 72 had been the royal family of Commagene. For a more general and recent survey of Mithraism see Manfred Clauss, *The Roman Cult of Mithras: The God and His Mysteries* (Routledge, 2000; translated from the German by Richard Gordon).

18. Ramsay MacMullen (MacMullen 1981, pp. 122-27) makes a provocative - but not, I think, a persuasive - argument against the widespread view that the Afterlife was a major concern in Mithraism. David Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries* (Oxford: OUP, 1991), makes the fullest case for Mithraism as rooted in astrology. The tauroctony (bull-slaying) that appears in every Mithraeum, usually as a carved relief, shows Mithras slaying a bull, and in attendance are a dog, a snake, a raven, and a scorpion. The bull-slaying, Ulansey argues, refers to the constellation Taurus, out of which the sun had passed in its slow progress along the "celestial equator" that cosmologists had constructed in their geocentric universe. The four attendant creatures in the standard iconography of the tauroctony are the constellations Canis Minor, Hydra, Corax and Scorpio (all four constellations lay on the "celestial equator").

19. Cicero, who considered himself an Academic, spoke only of an "old Academy" and a "new Academy", the latter commencing with Antiochos of Ascalon. Sextus Empiricus distinguished five periods of the Academy, making Antiochos the founder of the "Fifth Academy." For our purposes the "Old Academy" began with Plato, the "Middle Academy" with Arkesilas, and the "New Academy" with Antiochos.

20. Viator, Viator! Quod tu es, ego fui. Quod ego sum, tu eris (*CIL* 11.6243). In very similar words, *CIL* 8.9913: Viator! Quod tu, et ego; quod ego, et omnes ("Oh, you who pass by! What you are, I was too; what I am, everyone will be").

21. *CIL* 12.825: Flos aetatis hic iacet intus condita saxo.

O utinam possit reparari spiritus ille

Ut sciret quantus dolor est!

22. *CIL* 6.15258: Balnea, vina, Venus corrumpunt corpora nostra, set vitam faciunt b(alnea) v(ina) V(enus).