

Judaism at the Time of Jesus

The *Promised Land*. The *Holy Land*. The *Land of Israel*. The *Land of Canaan*. More than the names of a geographical site on a map, these words describe the ancestral and spiritual connection held within the hearts of Jews. The land of Palestine was the sign of God's everlasting covenant with them.

Jesus, as the Son of the covenant, rooted his mission and spiritual message in this holy land. It was and still is a land swelling with life, diversity, beauty, and tension. It is a land formed by hills and plains, mountains and valleys, bodies of water and desert. As Jesus walked this land, he must have been drawn to the sights, the sounds, and the fragrances that surrounded him. The influence of this land on Jesus is captured in the many references to nature noted in Scripture.

The land is divided into several regions. Geographically, the major provinces noted in Scripture are Judea, Samaria, and Galilee. These divisions, however, were more than geographic. Each region had its own cultural, social, and religious identity.

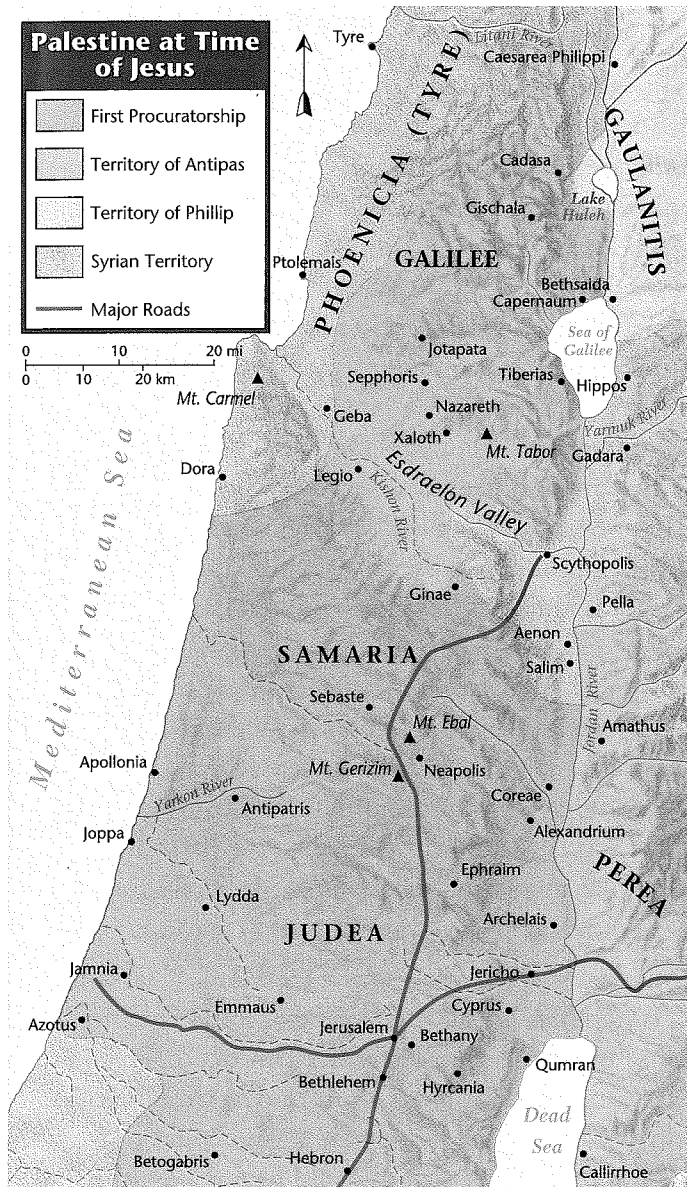
Judea Those living in Judea considered their region to be most sacred. Within the boundaries of Judea lay Jerusalem, the City of David. Jerusalem was both the political and spiritual capital of the country. Jews living here tended to be orthodox and nationalistic. This sacred city was connected to many important events in biblical history. With the dawning of a *new Jerusalem*, the city would become the site where ancient biblical prophecies would be fulfilled through Jesus.

By the time Jesus was born, Jerusalem had formed the heart of Jewish existence for ten centuries. Jesus appeared to love this city. The Temple was located here. Jews viewed the Temple as the center of the universe—the connecting point where God and humans met. The Temple was central to the ritual worship of God that had been practiced for centuries.

Explore the Land

Map of Palestine This is the land that Jesus knew. Identify which villages and cities Jesus visited.

Why are these locations important to our understanding of the life and ministry of Jesus?



Faith Activity

Prayer Write a prayer thanking God for a place in your life that has been sacred to you. As you pray, remember all the details of why this place is special to you—the sights, the sounds, the smells, the people who were present, and the feelings you associate with this place.

Samaria The region of Samaria had at one time been the northern capital of Israel. In 721 B.C. Assyria conquered Samaria, whose inhabitants then went into exile. Only a small number of Israelites remained. Many of those who remained intermarried with the foreign occupants of the land. Consequently, most Jews in the southern regions of Israel despised the Samaritans and considered them outcasts.

Galilee Farther north was the region of Galilee. *Galilee* means “circle of Gentiles.” True to its name, Galilee was encircled by Gentiles (non-Jews). Many of the Jewish people living in Galilee adopted some of the customs of their Gentile neighbors. For this reason, the Jews of Judea often looked down on the Galileans.

According to the Gospels, Jesus spent most of his life and ministry in Galilee. His hometown of Nazareth was part of the province of Galilee. It was here and in Judea that the message of Christianity was first preached.

The Importance of Family in Jewish Life

Every culture has norms that guide human behavior and social interactions. Today, when we think about *family life* and *marriage*, the meanings we associate with these words are directly connected to our own cultural experience. The institutions of family and marriage at the time of Jesus also highlight religious cultural attitudes and perspectives.

Family life formed the heart of the Jewish culture. Family members provided for their basic needs within the household: they prepared food, weaved clothing, made furniture, and fashioned tools. Also, property stayed within the family from one generation to the next.

The home—the center of Jewish social life—focused on the family. Rules based in the Torah, or Law, governed family relationships. Children were expected to honor their parents, and parents cared diligently for their children. Religious and societal norms called for all family members to behave in ways that would not bring dishonor to the other family members. When parents became older, responsibilities shifted, and children assumed the care of their parents.

Religion played the most important part in Jewish family life. Jewish worship most commonly took place in the home. The religious and social center rested on and around the dinner table. Festive meals in celebration of holy days and the Sabbath were among the most important family occasions. Members of the family had special roles in these religious celebrations. These celebrations were a time of prayer, joy, and fellowship with family and other Jews of the community.

Jewish Marriages Marriages were arranged as a legal and social contract between two families. The families hoped the marriage would enhance their status, produce male heirs, and preserve and transfer family property to the next generation. Marriage arrangements focused on finding an honorable family. The bride’s family usually looked for someone who could provide for their daughter, was a respected citizen, and would be a good father.



Marriage and family remain central to Jewish faith, and from the very beginning of the Church, the significance of family and home has been stressed. As with Jews in Jesus' time, the Christian home is where children first learn and experience their faith. Families have a responsibility to create a community of prayer, virtue, and love. Parents live out their marriage covenant in many ways, but especially through the welcoming and forming in faith any children they may have. Parents and guardians are called to meet the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of their children, guiding them to follow Jesus. Children, in turn, live out their faith by showing their parents and guardians respect, obedience, and appreciation for all that they do.

Family Meals Today

How do you think that family meals today differ from family meals in the time of Jesus? How are they similar?

Groups Within Judaism

Historians speculate that five groups of Jews lived within Israel during the time of Jesus and early Christianity: Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, Zealots, and the largest segment of the population, those who were poor. Each group seems to have had distinct cultural characteristics as well as varying, and often conflicting, political and religious ideologies.

Pharisees The **Pharisees** were the most influential religious sect during the lifetime of Jesus and the religious group mentioned most often in the New Testament. As well-educated religious leaders, they focused on keeping the Jews faithful to the Law. Their interpretation of the Law focused on a strict observance of the Sabbath and on obeying purity laws, dietary rules, and ritual cleansings. Pharisees also acknowledged the oral traditions of the elders.

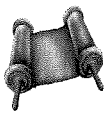
The New Testament portrays the Pharisees as people who were models of obedience to the Law. Jesus sometimes criticized them for worrying too much about superficial matters and not caring enough for the spirit of the Law. We read in the Gospels that they excluded the *unclean* from table fellowship. The *unclean* included those who were physically or emotionally ill and tax collectors. Some of the Pharisees in the Gospels appear as hostile questioners of Jesus. Others apparently liked him and were curious about his teachings. Of them Jesus said, "The scribes and the Pharisees sit on Moses' seat; therefore, do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach" (*Matthew 23:2-3*). Some Pharisees were sincere in their practice of the religious traditions. One of Jesus' Apostles, Matthew, was a Pharisee, as was Saint Paul. Jesus shared certain beliefs with the Pharisees: the resurrection of the righteous, the existence of angels and spirits, and a final judgment.

eg. to
Pharisees
in non-
rel. settings



Interpret the Art

The Sabbath Pharisees Instructing a Man Not to Transport a Bed on the Sabbath by Cristoforo de Predis, 1476. The Pharisees followed the Law explicitly, several times chiding Jesus and his followers. Read John 5:1-18. What does Jesus instruct the man to do? Why do you think he instructed the man as he did?



BREAK OPEN the Word

Jesus and the Law

In pairs or small groups, discuss three of the following Gospel references. What is happening in the stories you have chosen? In each, how would you describe the relationship between the Pharisees or Sadducees and Jesus?

Matthew 9:9–17

Matthew 12:1–4

Matthew 16:1–12

Matthew 22:15–46

Mark 7:1–13

Mark 10:2–9

Mark 12:18–27

Luke 5:17–26

Luke 11:37–54

John 9:13–41

Sadducees The Sadducees did not believe in anything that wasn't mentioned in the Torah. For example, they did not believe in life after death. As part of the wealthy, conservative, aristocratic ruling class, many Sadducees actively worked with the Romans. This relationship helped them maintain their economic power. They were also powerful in the religious community because, by heredity, they were the chief priests and elders of the people.

Although the Sadducees are seldom mentioned in the New Testament, they were a small but significant group within the landscape of Judaism. Because the Temple was the most important religious symbol to the Jews, the Sadducees occupied an important position. Sadducees were responsible for preserving the sanctity of the Temple and for managing it. They also composed the majority of the seventy-one-member Sanhedrin, the highest court of Israel. They emphasized temple sacrifice, which is one reason the group declined after the Temple was destroyed in A.D. 70.

Scribes The scribes, who interpreted and taught the Law, were most closely affiliated with the Pharisees, but they were also associated with the Sadducees. Scribes were not a religious party; rather, they were the Jewish scholars who assisted in writing and telling Jews about their religious traditions. At that time, many people in the Mediterranean world were unable to read or write. Scribes were responsible for writing and keeping records for the people. In addition, they may have served at synagogue services by reading and explaining the Jewish Scriptures.



Essenes Unlike the Sadducees, the **Essenes** are believed to have withdrawn completely from the world and from political activity to prepare for the imminent coming of God. They typically avoided all contact with foreign cultures and followed the Law of Moses to the last detail. Believing that Temple worship was impure and that the Jews had become lax in living the Law, the Essenes withdrew to desert communities to live a pure, monastic lifestyle. This sect probably influenced John the Baptist. Although not mentioned in the Bible, sources indicate their existence as part of the Qumran movement—a group of Essenes that settled in the desert area around the Qumran riverbed.

Zealots Another group, the **Zealots**, formed a rebellious movement of militant Jews who yearned and battled for the recovery of Jewish independence. They considered the acceptance of foreign government and the subsequent payment of taxes to Rome as blasphemy against God.

Other groups within Judaism held this minority sect in contempt. The Zealots were primarily responsible for the outbreak of violence against Rome from A.D. 66 to 70. Eventually, this uprising resulted in the destruction of the Temple and the Jewish community in Jerusalem. Only the Pharisees survived this disaster. After the fall of Jerusalem, the Zealots, the Sadducees, and the Essenes either disappeared or were drastically reduced in number.

The Great Majority In contrast to the groups just discussed, the majority of the Jewish population was poor. The mission of Jesus was most clearly linked to these people. At the beginning of his public ministry, Jesus stated:



SCRIPTURE

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release
to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord’s
favor.”

Luke 4:18–19

In this passage Jesus described the following important parts of his mission:

- to preach the good news to the poor
- to help people be free to really live
- to perform acts of mercy
- to work toward social justice
- to celebrate and proclaim the arrival of deliverance

Faith Activity

A Message Emerging from the religious and cultural values of his time, Jesus was a prophetic voice challenging the norms of his day. The focus of his message was his teaching of love—that God is an eternal exchange of love, uniting us to share in that love and to bring others to it. This inspiring message has transformed the world.

1. From Scripture you have read and heard, in what specific ways did Jesus fulfill this mission?
2. In a group, write lyrics for a song describing Jesus’ mission and teaching of love. Perform your song for your class.

Politics and Society of the Time

To become aware of the values of the ancient world, it helps to consider the religious, political, social, and cultural environment at the time of Jesus. Looking back can help us better appreciate our relationship to the first followers of Christ.

At the beginning of the Christian era, the Greco-Roman world was politically united under Roman rule and culturally unified through the **Hellenistic**, or Greek, influence. Many different religions and cults, however, characterized the religious sphere because of the Roman policy not to disturb the religious practices of the territories they conquered. Although these beliefs existed alongside each other, they sometimes rivaled one another for dominance.

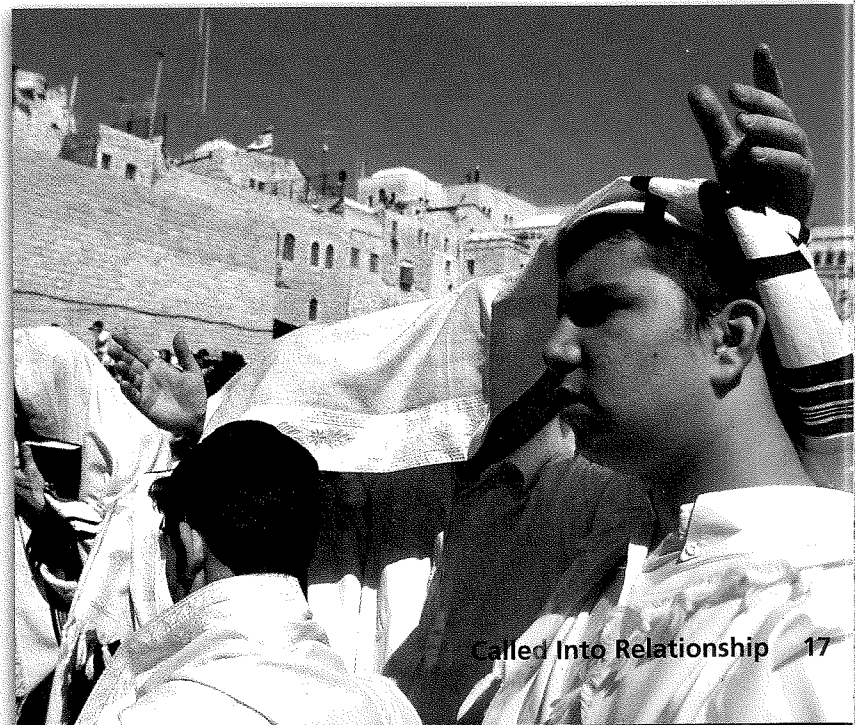
The Political Scene

One way that Rome ensured stability throughout its empire was its policy of appointing a leader from within the conquered people. When Jesus was born, Herod the Great was the handpicked Roman choice to govern Palestine. But Herod was not a pure Jew; in other words, his bloodline and social background were not completely Jewish. His mother was an Arabian princess. Also, Herod was an Idumaeen Jew. Idumaeans were forced to accept Judaism when they were conquered by the Hasmonaean ruler John Hyrcanus. Consequently, Herod was distrusted and hated by most Jews in the region.

Herod's own personality traits reinforced this distrust. Even though Herod was a genius at political and military maneuvers, he was also ambitious, ruthless, violent, and cruel. The Jews further despised him because he was a puppet of Rome and the visible symbol of the foreign rule and tyranny they were under.

Herod's violent and suspicious nature also affected his family. He is believed to have ordered the execution of a wife, three of his sons, a brother-in-law, and several other relatives. The Gospel according to Matthew records Herod's attempt to kill the infant Jesus by massacring all the male infants in Bethlehem. He apparently feared competition for being king of the Jews.

▼ Jews pray at the Western Wall during Passover.





Faith Activity

Values in Today's

Society Discuss with a group of students the values in society that we, as Christians, are challenged to reject. Interview your parents, or a priest, to see if the values they identify coincide with yours. Write a three-page essay expressing the values in our society we are challenged to reject and the little ways we can begin to change society for the better.

On the other hand, Herod prompted cultural and religious progress. One of Herod's accomplishments was in architecture. He reconstructed areas of Jerusalem, Jericho, and Caesarea. He built theaters, amphitheaters, and the hippodromes for Grecian games to honor Augustus. Most favorable in the eyes of the Jews were his efforts to reconstruct the Temple of Jerusalem. Yet these buildings were paid for at the expense of the people, who were taxed almost out of existence.

When Herod died in 4 B.C., three of his sons divided the territory. Herod Antipas (4 B.C.–A.D. 39) gained Galilee and Perea. He is the Herod mentioned most frequently in Scripture and was responsible for the execution of John the Baptist by beheading and for returning Jesus to Pilate.

The Roman Empire In addition to the territories governed by Herod's sons, the Roman Empire stretched from Syria to the British Isles, encompassing most of Western Europe except for part of Germany and Scandinavia. By the end of the first century A.D., the empire is estimated to have included 100 million people of different customs, cultures, and faiths.

The Peace of Rome, or *Pax Romana*, was in effect. Unity, relative peace, and law enforcement allowed for improved trade and increased business within the Roman Empire. Roads were built and maintained throughout the regions. Sea trade also flourished, allowing Rome to connect and trade with such faraway lands as China and India.

Although Rome had developed the web of roads and sea transportation for business and military purposes, early Christianity also profited from their construction. This network provided a means for the messengers of the *word* to spread the Good News of Jesus throughout the Empire.

Just as the transportation system provided for the spread of the Gospel, the Greek culture and language aided in spreading the word of God. Alexander the Great, who lived hundreds of years before Jesus, was responsible for making *koine*, or common Greek, the common language of the Mediterranean world. The New Testament was written in Greek, and in most areas of the empire, the Gospel was preached in Greek. The spread of Christianity in the first centuries happened almost entirely in regions under Greek influence.

Hellenism was primarily a reflection of the culture and beliefs of the city of Athens and other Greek cities. Classical literature, art and architecture, and extensive trade among regions characterized the culture. The Greek pagan religion was based on myths and legends surrounding the dramas of the god Zeus and a host of other gods. The spread of this culture into surrounding regions greatly influenced the Mediterranean culture.

Social Classes

Cultural anthropologists have determined eight social classes, which moved in a downward ranking, within the Mediterranean world.

These eight social classes were divided into two economic classes: those who were rich and those who were poor. The wealthy owned businesses or land. They made and enforced the rules. A small number of people owned the majority of the land and its resources. The poor class included the peasants who worked the land, artisans, unskilled laborers, and those who were destitute. Most of the population was made up of simple, ordinary people. They lived in debt as a result of the taxes imposed on them by the government and by their religious leaders. Some were even forced to sell themselves and their families into slavery.

Approximately 90 percent of the population lived in poverty. Those who were poor were generally illiterate, with limited opportunities for education. They passed down their histories orally and frequently used songs as teaching tools. Most of the population knew Greek and possibly also spoke a language native to their area of the country. It was not unusual for poor people to die by age thirty from disease, lack of hygiene, or an inadequate diet.

In general Jesus' public ministry took place among the majority population—those who were poor. He empathized with them. The teaching and example of Jesus often focused on alleviating the plight of the poor population. He welcomed those who were poor and included everyone in his invitation to follow him. In fact, many members of the early Church

Work with the Chart

Discussion Group Discuss in a small group the social classes you perceive in our culture.

1. What factors determine a person's class?
2. What was Jesus' attitude toward the social divisions of his time?
3. How do you think he would react to the divisions in our society?

| Social Classes | | |
|----------------|---|---------------|
| Classification | Who are they? | Example |
| Ruler | People of great power and influence in a large region, often obtaining power through war or inheritance | Julius Caesar |
| Governor | Often appointed by the ruler to control a smaller area, a province, or a city | Herod |
| Merchant | People who traded goods from different regions, as well as the military and the bureaucracy | Zacchaeus |
| Peasant | Farmers who worked the land and occasionally owned it, but frequently lost their land due to taxation. They often became tenant farmers and worked their own land for someone else. Fisherman also fell into this classification. | Simon Peter |
| Artisan | Bartered the goods they created | Joseph |
| Unclean | Generally peasants or artisans who failed and then attempted to make their living as beggars or bandits. Included in this group were the poorest people, often afflicted with medical conditions. | The Lepers |

Faith Activity

Similarities and Differences How are the beliefs and practices described in the various mystery cults similar to or different from today's religious traditions or beliefs? You may want to do some additional research to more fully consider the question.

were among the ordinary people, who labored long hours to provide for their families.

Other early Christians lived in cities with affluent families. The head of the household was wealthy and influential. Unlike today, where many homes contain only one family, Hellenistic households might have had several generations of extended family living together. In addition, slaves and employees were counted as members of the household. This type of living arrangement benefited the expansion of Christianity: when the head of the household became a believer and was baptized, usually all members of the household followed.

Cult Practices

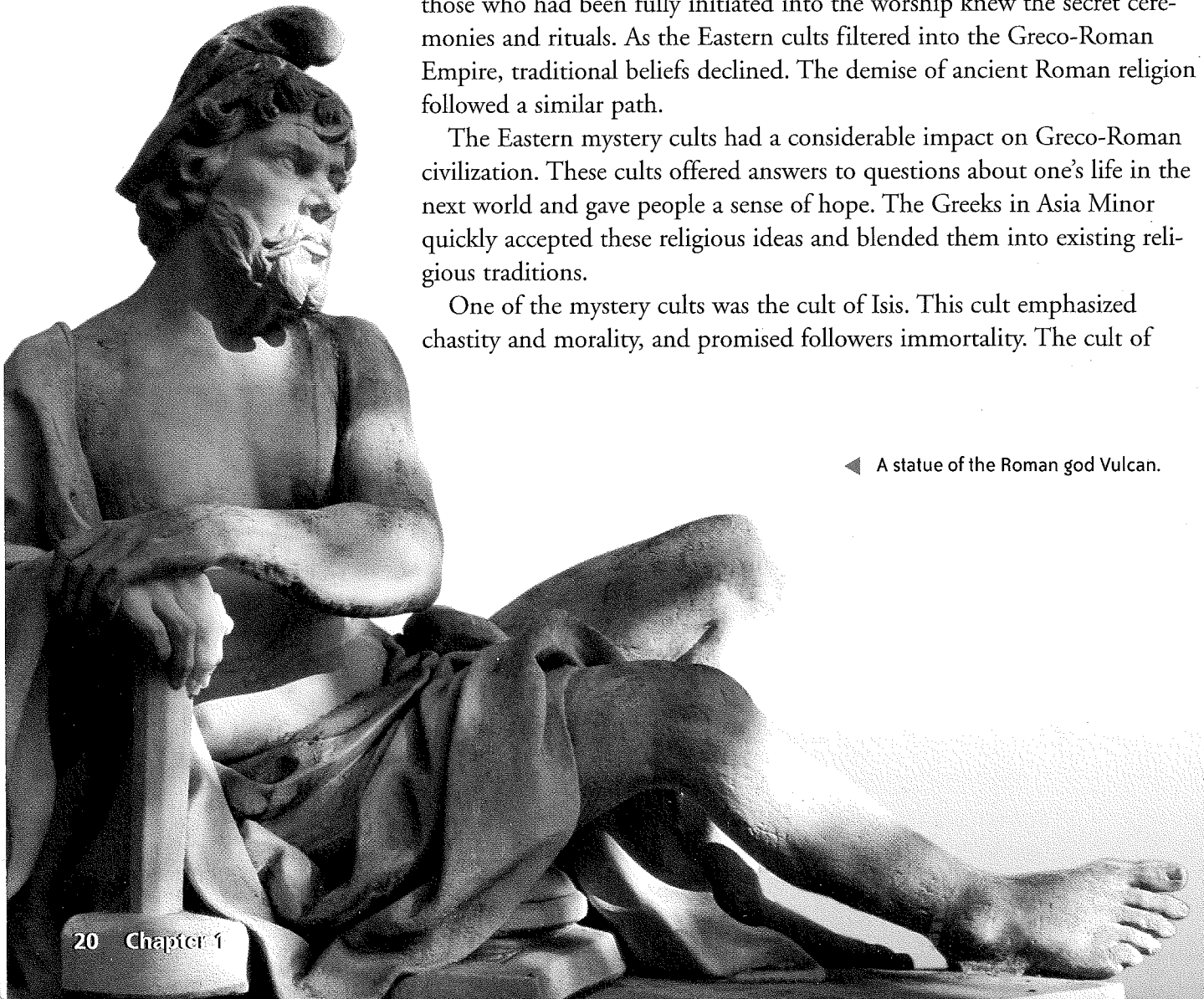
Christianity was born into a culture that was predominantly **polytheistic**, meaning that many gods were worshiped. (Judaism, by contrast, was monotheistic and exclusive.) In fact, it was normal for non-Jews to participate in the practice of more than one religion. People could choose from many religions and philosophies. A small sampling of the religious beliefs and rituals that existed at the dawn of Christianity are listed in the following paragraphs. Many followers of the mystery cults came to accept Christianity.

For the most part, we know little of the origins of the mystery cults. Only those who had been fully initiated into the worship knew the secret ceremonies and rituals. As the Eastern cults filtered into the Greco-Roman Empire, traditional beliefs declined. The demise of ancient Roman religion followed a similar path.

The Eastern mystery cults had a considerable impact on Greco-Roman civilization. These cults offered answers to questions about one's life in the next world and gave people a sense of hope. The Greeks in Asia Minor quickly accepted these religious ideas and blended them into existing religious traditions.

One of the mystery cults was the cult of Isis. This cult emphasized chastity and morality, and promised followers immortality. The cult of

◀ A statue of the Roman god Vulcan.



Demeter promised its followers deliverance and a better fate in the world beyond. Some of the cults, such as the cult of Dionysus, had secret rites. This cult revolved around the death and resurrection of Dionysius. The cult of Mithras also had its own secret rites. It was an offshoot of the ancient Persian religion of Zoroastrianism and was at one time a strong rival to Christianity.

The cult of the emperor was not a mystery religion—public acknowledgment of the emperor was promoted as a sign of political submission. Those who refused to acknowledge the cult were persecuted and martyred. Many of those who chose to follow Christ instead of the emperor were also persecuted, and some were even martyred.

Philosophical Movements

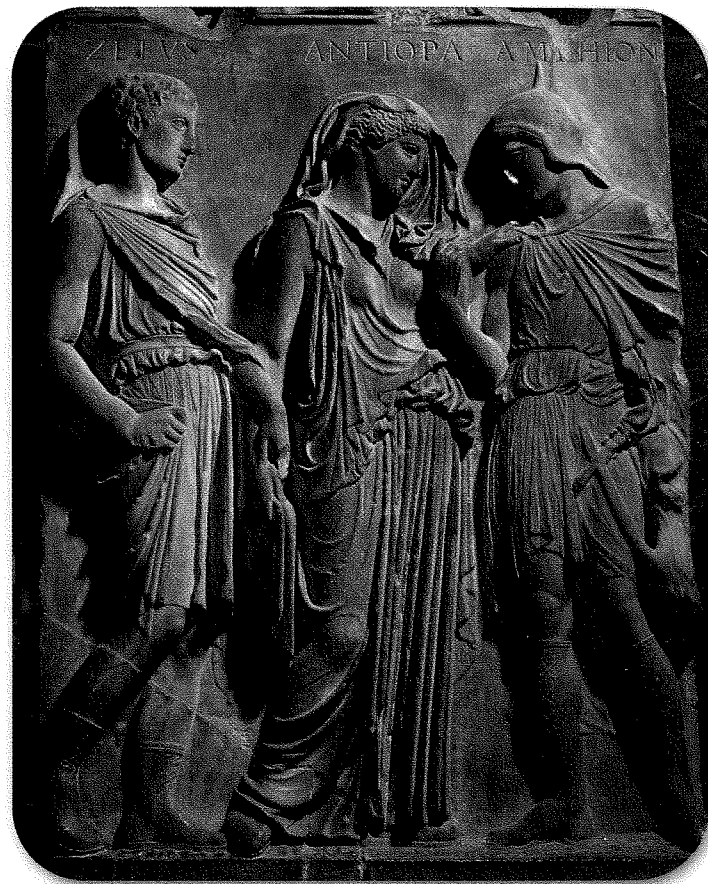
In addition to these cults, several schools of philosophy were popular. These philosophies aided people in considering how they should live their lives. They helped some people feel more secure in their unstable world. People attracted to these philosophical ideas were typically well educated.

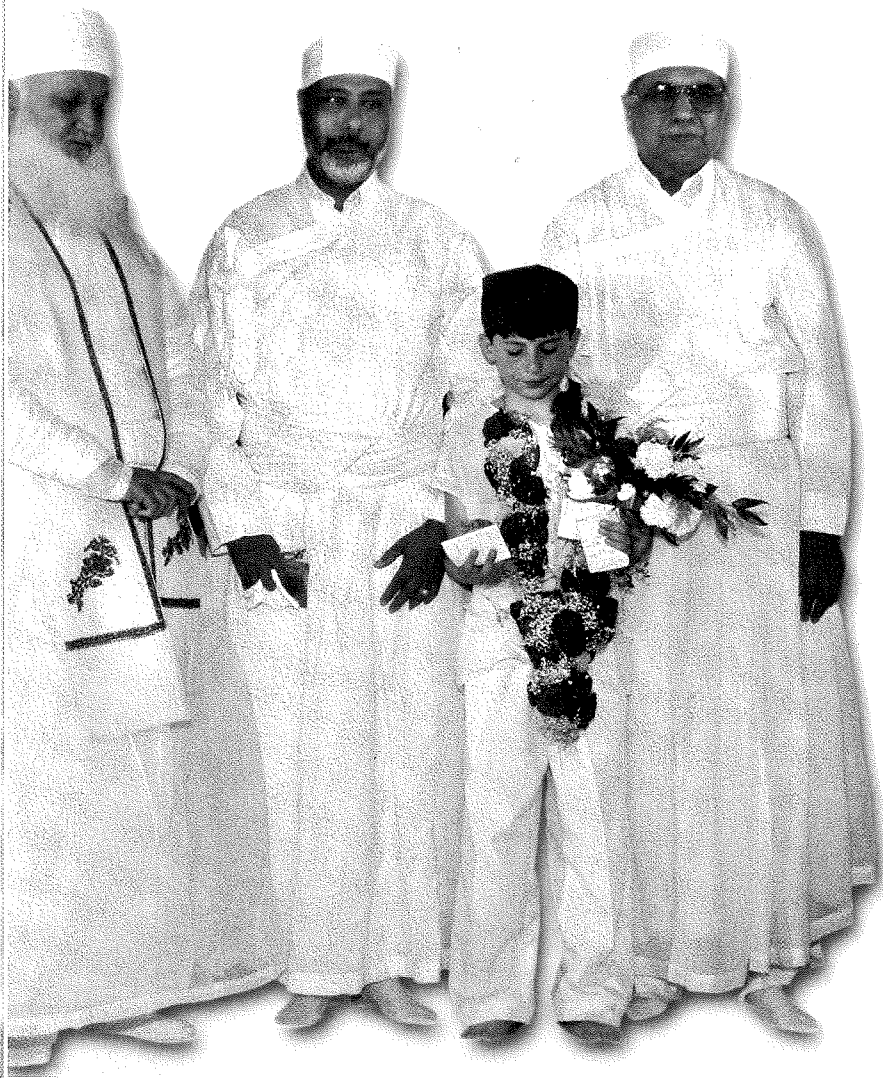
Philosophies

The Epicureans promoted several ideas: the pleasure of the mind is to contemplate the pleasure of the body; the safest social pleasure was friendship; and if gods did exist, they did not become involved in human affairs.

Unlike Epicureans, Cynics believed that all pleasures of life were evil and should be scorned. They advocated returning to a simple, natural lifestyle.

While Stoicism evolved from Cynicism, Stoics believed that all life is part of a single system called *nature* and that life is good when one is in harmony with nature.





▲ Priests attend the Zoroastrian initiation ceremony known as *Naujote*.

Magic and More Magical practices and the conjuring of spirits were also common at this time. Many people believed in and feared demons. Professional magicians used magic to ward off the power of the demons. The magician and his followers believed that both the power of the stars and all the good and evil forces in the universe could influence most aspects of life.

Millions of people looked to the stars as deities and believed they were as powerful as the gods Jupiter, Isis, and Osiris. They thought the movements of the heavenly bodies controlled their lives. Emperor and subject alike held profound belief in astrology.

While these beliefs and ceremonies clearly contradict the practices and teachings of the Church, the persistence of the Jews and the Christians in worshiping the one true God appeared atheistic to the people of this period. The only beliefs or religions that have survived from this time are all monotheistic: Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Zoroastrianism. Eventually all pagan cults and religions other than Christianity were prohibited in the late fourth century in an edict issued by Emperor Theodosius I.



Live in Christ Early followers of Jesus experienced firsthand the struggles and temptations of living in their society. Read Ephesians 4:17–24 to learn about Saint Paul’s advice to an early Christian community, then answer the following questions:

1. Write a two-paragraph response to the advice given in this passage.
2. How do the values in this passage contradict those of the mystery cults and philosophical schools of the first-century world?
3. Why is the advice in this passage still good to follow today?

