

Chapter Six

Religious changes in the Hellenistic period: India, the Near East and Greece

The political, social, linguistic and cultural changes that followed Alexander's conquests came the religious changes that make the Hellenistic period so important in the world's religious history. Our attention will focus especially on the Near East and the eastern Mediterranean, where the three great monotheistic religions began, but we must first look at India.

A. India

Alexander's foray into northwest India, from 326 to 324 BC, was not as consequential 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 still undeciphered Indus Valley script, used for writing whatever language was spoken in the Panjab in the third millennium BC, had fallen 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.¹ 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 Pālī, 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 descendent 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 (Basham 1967, p. 388). Panini lived in Takshashila, 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.² 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).³

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, and 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 (Basham 1989, p. 30). 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 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 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 scholar 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 became 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. (On all this see Basham 1967, pp. 63 ff., and Basham

1989, pp. 83-97)

B. 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 Hellenistic rulers tried not to disturb the traditional cults and made conspicuous gifts to some of the temples (the aniconic cults in their high places were less able to make use of or to display royal generosity). 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 a very important part of the Near Eastern landscape during the Hellenistic period.

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 much more tenuous) 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 gods - Sobek in the Fayyum, Min at Coptos, Seth at Ombos, and many others - were so important in the lives of Egyptian peasant-farmers (*fellahin*) that their cults 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 three millennia. Not surprisingly, the worship of the nome-gods continued unabated until the third and fourth centuries CE, when it was replaced by Christianity.

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 one of the Syrian cults. This was 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 golden images, sat enthroned: she on a pair of lions, and he on yoked bulls. Outside the temple was the altar on which priests - 300 of them, all in white robes - made sacrifices to the divine couple, and beyond the altar a wide courtyard in which worshippers assembled on festival days. The precinct also included an oracle, yet another statue-god, who miraculously moved about, sweated and sometimes 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 worshippers. Many a dedication was made in gratitude for Atargatis' help in bringing a woman and baby safely through childbirth.

In Anatolia the old cults did very well in the Hellenistic period.⁴ 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 (11.12.2 and 12.2.3), the place was a huge establishment that we may loosely describe as a temple-state, even though it was not entirely autonomous. The goddess Hapat had by this time become simply "Ma" to her worshippers, 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 Pontus. On these occasions, according to Strabo (12.3.36), Pontic Komana was as disastrous for lusty men as was Corinth, where merchants and soldiers alike had squandered their savings and had inspired the proverb, "Not every man should make a voyage to Corinth."

C. The Hellenes

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" oral performances of poetry were no longer the main source of wisdom for wealthy Hellenes. In the fourth century BC elite intellectual communities coalesced in the schools founded by Plato and Aristotle. Attachment to these schools was initially physical: the students of Plato and Aristotle spent years in the company of their teachers, and the number of young men who had studied at either the Academy or at the *Peripatos* was therefore quite small. In the period after Alexander many a wealthy Hellene who had never visited Athens was nevertheless able to identify himself as an adherent of

this or that philosophical school, having read the works of various philosophers and having found the teachings of this or that school most to his liking. A prerequisite for such “shopping around” was of course fluent literacy. The governing class of Hellenes, whether in “old Greece” or in the new cities in Asia and Egypt, took literacy for granted, and for these privileged few there were now books that set forth philosophical systems new and old. Among the *gnorimoi*, a privileged minority in every Greek city, religion was therefore typically subordinate to philosophy. For *hoi polloi*, on the other hand, philosophy was not readily accessible, and “the many and the poor” were accordingly attracted to one or more of the numerous cults that were available in the Hellenistic period. The distinction between readers and non-readers was to be especially significant in the spread of mystery cults and religions, Judaism and Christianity among them, that depended especially on the spoken word, on the public announcement (*kērygma*) and on preaching to make conversions.

Much of the success of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophical schools, both of them established in the very last years of the fourth century BC, was due to the dramatic arrival of astrology in the Greek world. The Hellenes had begun to hear about this pseudo-science as early as ca. 350 BC, but it was Alexander’s conquest of Mesopotamia that opened the floodgates for astrology and astrologers. 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. The most authoritative 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 educated Hellene who wondered about the validity of astrology found little guidance in the writings of Plato and Aristotle, since both had died before astrology’s heyday began. Zeno and Epicurus, on the other hand, directly confronted the new “science” both in their spoken discourses and in their writings. Epicurus, who rejected astrology, wrote in a plain style, so that readers could more readily grasp his meaning. Better yet, he distilled his complicated system into a few dozen short and pithy sentences, which he labeled the *kuriai doxai* (“The most important opinions”). Despite these efforts at broadcasting, the Epicurean philosophy appealed mostly to the reading class. Zeno, who integrated astrology into his Stoic system, held forth orally in the Painted Stoa of Athens, where his lectures could be heard by rich and poor alike. But his system was too complicated to be either constructed or conveyed orally, and he too depended on writing and reading. His successors abandoned the crowded stoa in favor of a more intimate school, and were even more dependent upon the written treatise. The writings of Chrysippos, the leading Stoic philosopher of the late third century BC, were said to have filled 705 papyrus rolls. The “Middle” Academy of Arkesilas, which directed much of its skepticism against the claims of astrologers, was accessible only to the well-to-do reader. Students at the Academy were expected to have read widely in the philosophical literature of not only the Academy itself but also of the rival schools. The only philosophers who relied upon public addresses and who concerned themselves with the non-reading masses were the Cynics. Diogenes of Sinope and later Cynics were more showmen and spectacles than philosophers. The

Cynic enjoyed mounting his soapbox in the midst of the *agora* and attracting a crowd with his “diatribe” (the *diatribē* was a public harangue). The Cynics’s message was that only by “living according to nature” could a man both find happiness and maintain his integrity.

Theology for the *gnorimoi*

The philosophically-minded Hellene could choose from several “theologies,” if we use the term loosely. The Epicurean did not deny the existence of the gods, but insisted that they had no control or even influence over events. 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 would have omitted the gods altogether had not his epistemology required them.⁵

Like the Epicureans, the Stoics accepted the Olympians as “gods,” but whereas the Epicureans made them irrelevant material beings, the Stoics reduced them to insignificance by turning them into abstractions. The Olympians, the Stoics taught, were not to be taken literally but were to be understood allegorically: 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 (Peters, p. 453).

The natural theology of the Stoics

While allegorizing (and so, in a way, salvaging) the Olympians, the Stoics posited something vaguely similar to the God of the monotheistic religions. The Stoics were thus pioneers of natural theology. In opposition to the Epicureans, Zeno and Cleanthes 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 based on their epistemology and physics. The existence of God, then, was a “rational conclusion.” The fiery world-*logos* was eternal, the Stoics taught. It determined everything that happened within the cosmos, and it was occasionally referred to as $\acute{\omicron}\ \theta\epsilon\acute{\omicron}\varsigma$ (for a few Stoics the sun itself was $\acute{\omicron}\ \theta\epsilon\acute{\omicron}\varsigma$). But unlike the personal and anthropopathic God of the Muslim, Christian and Jewish tradition, the Stoic God had no feelings or intentions, required no worship, and was immanent throughout the physical world.

Euhemerism and the Hellenes’ ignorance of the distant past

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 Heliopolis 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).⁶ 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 grousing 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.⁷ 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’ nonsense, and all through antiquity the Euhemerist explanation of the Olympians continued to be taken quite seriously.

The success of the idea is a stark illustration of the gullibility of the ancient Hellenes, no matter how educated, when confronted by fantasies about the remote past. In fact we may generalize that discovering what had actually happened in the remote past was not something that the Hellenes did very often or very well. Hekataios of Abdera was unusual in his earnest attempt to learn something about the distant past. 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 18th-century Enlightenment, when it was replaced by a critical study of history. Because that replacement marked the transition from Christendom to the modern world we may say that trying to establish what *really* happened in the past is thus 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 fantasy 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 some success in the Hellenistic world. Even fluent readers who described themselves as Stoics or Epicureans had inadequate defense against Euhemerus and other quacks who claimed to have new "information" about the remote past.

Religious tendencies of *hoi polloi*

While many of the wealthier Hellenes were turning to philosophy in the centuries after Alexander, the average Hellene tended to look for religious satisfaction in the old cults of the Olympians or of the Egyptian and Near Eastern gods. 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 every 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 worshipers.

To look to these old gods and Heroes for help, on the other hand, was plain folly. Even the mightiest of them 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. Devotees of Isis, Sarapis, Atargatis, and the Judaeon 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” 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. The incubation hall at Epidauros was festooned with numerous testimonials to the miraculous powers of Asklepeios. 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. Dionysos had no such central sanctuary, 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 in 186 BC the Roman senate 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 of 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 included few such temples. 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 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.

Many Hellenes were attracted to the "new" 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 two women of Alexandria, Gorgo and Praxinoa, are eager 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 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.

Sarapis and Isis

The Ptolemies used religion to further their political interests, and toward that end redesigned an old Egyptian cult along lines that would appeal to Hellenes. 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. Because Hellenes had no interest in worshipping animals, the Apis bull was all but 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 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 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 42 commandments that the righteous were to keep).

D. Hell

One of the most important religious developments of the Hellenistic period was the growing belief in punishment that awaited evil-doers in the Afterlife. Early in the Hellenistic period this was the belief of an insignificant minority, but by the first century BC enough people shared the belief to cause comments by philosophers and poets. It continued to grow steadily through the first and second centuries CE, and by the third most people were convinced that after death "the wicked" were in for a terrible retribution.

As we have seen in Chapter Two, belief in some kind of punishment after death had arisen in India by the seventh century BC, and by the sixth was being promoted in Iran by Zarathustra and in Greece by Pythagoras. The Indians and Pythagoras thought in terms of a soul - an *ātman* or *psychē* - that transmigrated from the wrongdoer to another person or animal, and so in the course of one or more subsequent lifetimes paid for the wrong that had been done the first time around. Pythagoras' doctrines were firmly held by the community that he founded, but that was a tiny group, and were also imbedded in "Orphic" teaching, chants and poems. Although in the fifth century BC a few eminent Hellenes - Pindar, for example - embraced the idea of an immortal soul, most educated Hellenes regarded it as superstition. That changed, however, when Plato used his great talents and industry to give intellectual respectability to the old Orphic and Pythagorean doctrines. In several dialogues Plato elaborated his description of the *psychē* (that people *have* souls seemed to him self-evident, and therefore in no need of demonstration) and argued for its pre-existence and immortality.

Plato spent less time discussing the rewards for the good souls than the punishment of the bad. At the end of the *Republic* (Bk 10, 614B-621) he told the story of Er the Pamphylian, who had been killed in battle, went to the Underworld, and then came back to life and revealed what he had seen and experienced in the Afterlife. The *psychai* of men and women, reported Er, suffered or enjoyed in the Afterlife what they merited: the dreadful tyrant Aridaios, for example, was dragged back and forth through thorns that tore his skin, and was then tossed into the bottomless pit of Tartaros. Even more graphic is the great myth at the end of the *Phaedo*. There Plato sketched in detail the geography of Hades, to which the souls of the wicked go after death. At *Phaedo* 113-14 “Sokrates” describes Hades’ four rivers - Ocean, Acheron, Pyriphlegethon, and Kokytos - and the great, bottomless pit of Tartaros into which plunge the souls of the worst men, never to emerge. The souls of great criminals - patricides and matricides, for example - who have remorse for their crimes are sent to Tartaros only for a while, and then are spewed out into the river Pyriphlegethon (“Raging Fire”) where they burn until (or unless) they are forgiven by those whom they have wronged. The souls of the righteous, on the other hand, escape all this and live in perfect bliss.

Plato called both of these stories *mythoi*, and knew that they were inventions. 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,⁸ skepticism reigned in the Academy and Plato’s myths about Hades were not given much attention there. They found a more receptive audience elsewhere, however. The Judaeen 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.

1. On these see Richard Salomon, “Brahmi and Kharoshthi,” in Daniels and Bright, *The World’s Writing Systems*, pp. 373-83.

2. See Walbank, *The Hellenistic World*, pp. 60-62.

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. On the Anatolian temples and “temple-states” see Laura Boffo, *I re ellenistici e i centri religiosi dell’Asia Minore* (Florence: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1985)

5. 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 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.

6. Drews 1973, p. 128-30.

7. M. Winiarczyk, *Euhemerios von Messene. Leben, Werk und Nachwirkung*. Beiträge zur Altertumskunde, Band 157. München/Leipzig: K.G. Saur, 2002

8. 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.” I shall regard the “Old Academy” as that of Plato and Speusippos, the “Middle Academy” as that from Arkesilas through Karneades, and the “New Academy” as commencing with Antiochos.