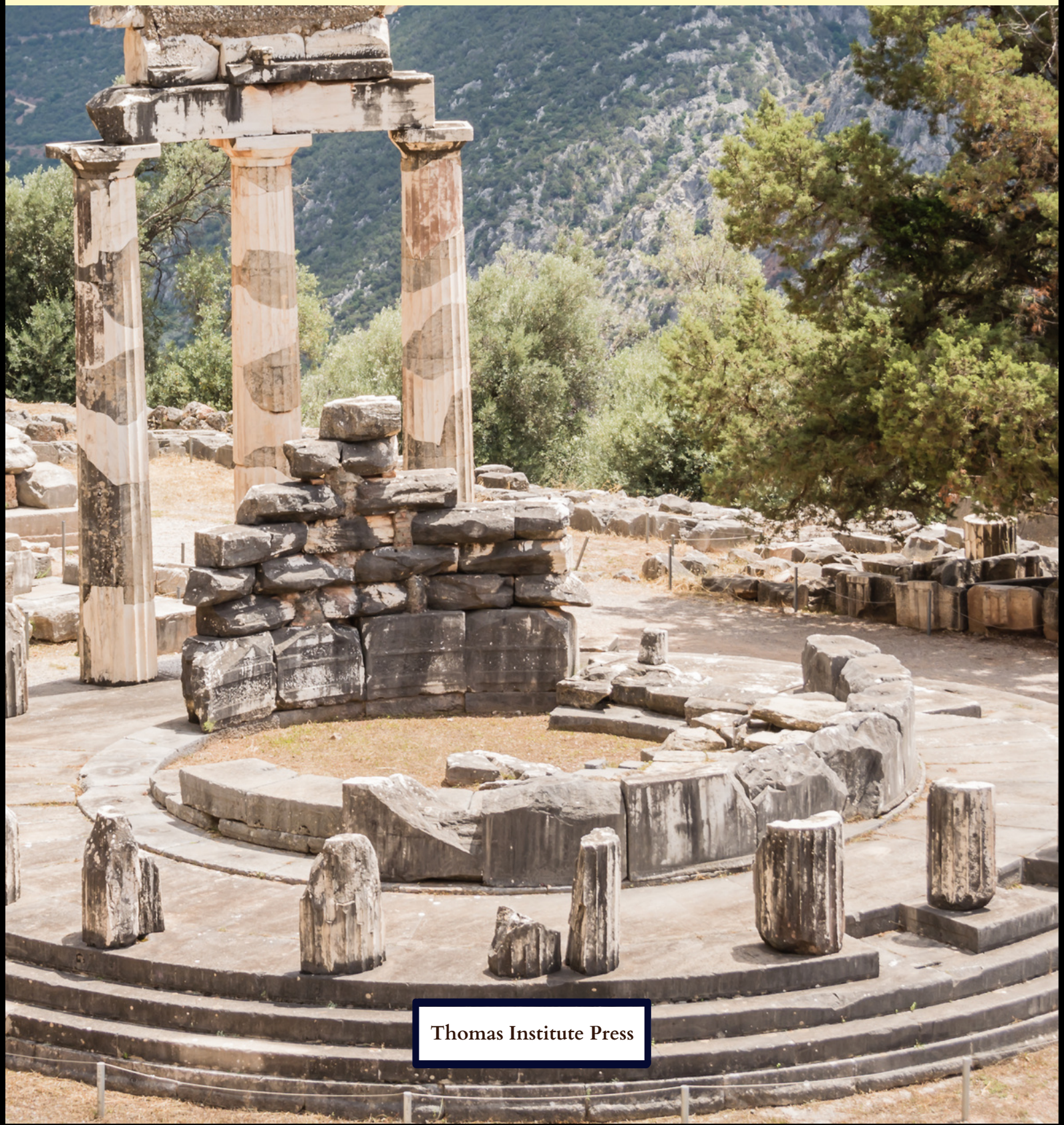
Ancient Greece: History, Culture, Religion



Thomas Institute Press

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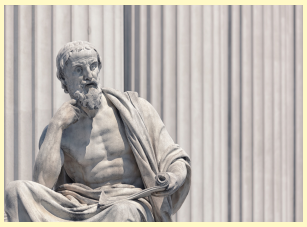
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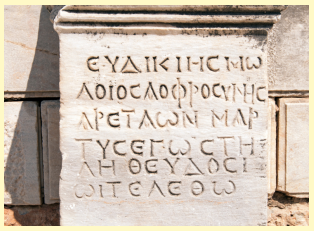
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Culture in Corinth

We were sitting under a tree at the archaeological site in Corinth while I read aloud 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, a passage referring to the Isthmian Games that took place the year immediately before and after the more famous Olympic Games. And that is when it dawned on the group. “Ah,” someone blurted, “I can now see the whole thing!” In fact, Paul could, too, because Paul was living in Corinth when the Isthmian Games were played there in 49 and 51 CE, and so he naturally made references to these kinds of events to teach important spiritual truths.



Corinth is one of my favorite biblical sites. Having been extensively excavated, it offers travelers a picture-perfect example of ancient Greek culture that comes alive when you learn more about ancient Greek architecture, politics, sports, customs, and religion. Virtually everything Paul mentions in his letters to the Christians there—whether mystery cults, politics, sexuality, social structures, sports, or religion—are embedded in the culture of ancient Greek society. And when you visit Greece, you will see exactly what I mean.



Three Parts: History, Culture, and Religion

To help you fully appreciate and make sense of the biblical and historical sites you will visit in Greece, this booklet offers three components related to ancient Greece: a brief overview of its history, culture, and religion. Naturally, the language of the ancient Greeks is very important to the Bible and Christianity, so I dedicate an entire booklet to that elsewhere (titled “It’s All Greek to Me”).

(1) Ancient Greek History

Let’s start with some history. And although I fully recognize that historical information can be dense, it will be helpful to keep this information handy when you are on site or preparing to visit historical places because it is easy to get confused about when so-and-so lived or when such-and-such happened. That’s because the Greeks have been around for a very long time. And, in fact, even today, the history of the Greek people is alive and well. For our purposes, we will divide ancient Greek history into six periods: (1) Mycenaean, (2) Archaic, (3) Classical, (4) Hellenistic, (5) Roman, and (6) Byzantine.



(i) Mycenaean Greece (1750-1050 BCE)

Mycenaean Greece spanned from approximately 1750

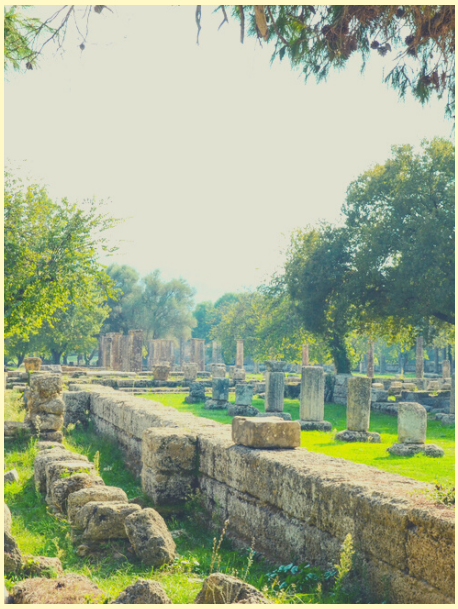
to 1050 BCE. It was the first population in Greece to speak Greek (called Linear B). We get the name "Mycenaean" (with the "c" pronounced like a "k") from their most prominent city—Mycenae—which is a site (still able to be visited today) located more than 100 miles southwest of Athens in the Peloponnese.



In the world-famous poem The Iliad, the Mycenaeans feature prominently in their war against the Trojans. And, not surprisingly for those familiar with that work, Mycenaean Greeks are responsible for many innovations in architecture, engineering, language, science, and the military. Their civilization disappeared during the last phase of the Bronze Age.

(ii) Archaic Greece (1050-500 BCE)

After the collapse of the Mycenaean civilization, Greece entered what is called the "Dark Age" of its history around the year 1050 BCE, which lasted until around 750 BCE. We do not have too many records of what happened then, but it is the period in which the Greek alphabet—adapted from the Phoenicians—came into existence. In turn, "Archaic Greece" followed the Dark Age and lasted from around 750 to 500 BCE.



Archaic Greece produced perhaps the two most influential books ever recorded: The Iliad and The Odyssey, both ascribed to Homer. These two epics spoke of duty, honor, piety, justice, war, and obligation in the most epic of fashions. Archaic Greece also witnessed the rise and popularity of the Olympic Games. These were held every four years. Only men competed, and they always did so completely naked, which is one reason why married women were not allowed to watch. Finally, Archaic Greece was also the time in which the famous Greek myths were written down (but more about that will be discussed below under "Religion"). And it was also when religious temples, designed to sacrifice to deities, began to be built.



(iii) Classical Greece (500-323 BCE)

This period, roughly lasting from 500 to 323 BCE, is perhaps the most common era in ancient Greek society. It is when the Greeks fought the Persians, when the Greeks fought rival Greek city-states (for instance, Athenians against Spartans), when Athens reached its political zenith, when playwrights and sculptors created masterpieces, and when philosophers made enduring contributions to human thought.

Due to the prosperity of its civilization, unprecedented advances occurred across various disciplines. And it is when



ancient Greece's most famous figures lived and breathed, such as Aeschylus, Alexander the Great, Aristophanes, Aristotle, Democritus, Demosthenes, Euripides, Heraclitus, Herodotus, Hippocrates, Isocrates, Pericles, Plato, Protagoras, Pythagoras, Socrates, Solon, Sophocles, and more. A whole book—or series of books—could be written about each one but suffice it to say that the contributions made by thinkers and leaders at this time endures to this day. Even to this day, and even though most people are unaware, their words and ideas linger in every part of the world.

(iv) Hellenistic Greece (323-30 BCE)

This refers to the period after the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE to the death of Cleopatra in 30 BCE. Alexander is regarded as perhaps the most successful and respected general in history, and the extent of his kingdom upon his death is staggering. The son of a Macedonian king, Alexander was taught by Aristotle and aspired to have the greatest kingdom of all time. He likely would have succeeded had he not died at a young age.

The legacy he left is referred to as "Hellenism," which generally refers to the spread of Greek language, culture, and ideas from Europe to North Africa to Asia. And it also refers to how this was mixed or syncretized with existing civilizations. In short, due to Alexander's legacy, the whole Mediterranean basin came to speak the same language and share a common way of thinking. This is what enabled the Bible to be written in Greek, the religion of Christianity to spread like wildfire, and for people groups of all backgrounds to unite around a common religion that originated from an otherwise obscure part of the world.

And if you would like to read about how this occurred after the time of Alexander, there are several books in the so-called Apocryphal or Deuterocanonical letters—which are contained in both the Catholic and Orthodox Bibles but not Protestant ones—that are set in this time period.

Finally, several new schools of thought emerged at this time that continue to this day. I am referring to Epicureanism, Stoicism, Skepticism, and Cynicism. Put briefly, Epicureans taught that we should lead a life free of distractions such as politics and public life, Stoics taught that we should live wisely and virtuously in accordance with nature, Skeptics taught that we cannot know anything for sure and so should suspend judgement altogether, and Cynics taught that we should cultivate reason, turn to self-discipline, and generally disregard social conventions. These schools of thought were alive and well in Jesus and Paul's day, and biblical figures refer to them in various ways. In fact, all of these schools of thought are still around today.





(v) Roman Greece (30 BCE-330 CE)

The Romans defeated the Greeks at the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE and then took possession of Alexandria, the last great city of Hellenistic Greece. Although the process of Roman domination had been in the works for more than a century, this inaugurated what is called "Roman Greece." The Romans, though the conquerors, adopted many of the ideas, philosophies, and religions of the Greeks. In this way, there was a merging together of Greek and Roman ideals that heavily influenced subsequent cultures. In fact, rather than rejecting the Greek deities, the Romans simply adapted them to their own. For instance, Zeus was seen as Jupiter, Diana as Artemis, Ares as Mars, Aphrodite as Venus, and so on.

This mixing together of Greek and Roman culture gave us the term "Greco-Roman." It was during the Greco-Roman period that all the New Testament events and stories took place. That is why the New Testament, though being written completely under the Roman Empire, nevertheless was written in Greek rather than Latin.

(vi) Byzantine Greece (330-1453)

This period of Greek history began when Constantine I, a baptized Christian, moved the capital of the Roman Empire from Rome to Constantinople (today's Istanbul but formerly called Byzantium) in 330 CE. As such, it is the only period in Greece's ancient history that was completely Christian in orientation. The official religion of this part of the empire was Eastern Orthodox Christianity, and it was also headquartered in Constantinople.

Byzantine Christianity played a very important role in the formation of Christian doctrine. All Seven Ecumenical Councils occurred under the authority of this empire, and all the deliberations took place in Greek society (Turkey today, but this was ancient Greek culture). Although the Byzantine Empire initially had Latin as its official language, that changed within a couple of centuries, and the form of the Greek language during this time is still evident today as the liturgical language of the Greek Orthodox Church.



Ancient Greek Ages and Dates

Greek Age	Time Period
Mycenaean	1750 – 1050 BCE
Archaic (Dark Age)	1050 – 750 BCE (750 – 500 BCE)
Cassical	500 – 323 BCE
Hellenistic	323 – 30 BCE
Roman	30 BCE – 330 CE
Byzantine	330 – 1453 CE

(2) Ancient Greek Culture

Ancient Greek society created the culture in which most of the New Testament was written, so it is important to understand some basic features to it. At the same time, it is essential to recognize that culture varied over time and location.

- **Art**: The ancient Greeks are world-famous for their developments in architecture, sculpture, pottery, and literature. It is not an exaggeration to say that virtually all art—particularly from the west—is heavily influenced by what the Greeks produced in the centuries leading up to Christ.

- **Democracy**: The Greeks invented the notion of democracy, which means "rule of the people." But this must be qualified. For this freedom was only granted to male citizens, meaning that women, slaves, and foreigners did not qualify. But to the male citizens who did qualify, it entitled them to an individual freedom never seen in the ancient world.

- **Patriarchy**: Ancient Greece was patriarchal in nature. This means that men were the only ones allowed to pass laws, make rulings, go to war, lead the government, arrange marriages, and generally maintain leadership over all public life. This general thinking is evident all throughout the Bible.

- **Polis**: This was the Greek word for "city-state," which encompassed cities and the countryside. Association within a *polis* meant that you had to worship its patron god or goddess, you had to partake of its communal rituals (such as animal sacrifice), and you had to fight on behalf of it. These values help explain how Christianity developed and what eventually constituted as "heresy," namely, refusing to honor the rituals of the larger community, denying the theological beliefs it professed, and objecting to fight for it when war approached. Aristotle summarized this thinking best when he wrote: "Humans are beings who by nature live in a *polis*" (*Politics* 1253a2-3).









- **Polis** (continued): Keep in mind that each of the major cities in the New Testament—such as Corinth, Philippi, Athens, Thessaloniki, Ephesus, and so on—was a *polis* that operated off these basic ideals.

- **Slavery**: Slavery was rampant in ancient Greek society. It was not based on race. Originally, slavery was the result of war. The losers in battle became slaves. But over time, as much as one-third of the ancient Greek population was slaves, and they were bought, sold, and forced to do any number of tasks: farming, cleaning, tutoring, cooking, fetching water, running errands, serving in sexual bondage, and watching the children. Slaves were owned both by individuals and city-states. They were regarded as property and running away was illegal and punishable by death. Slavery was assumed by Christians in the New Testament, and not one day ever passed that biblical and Christian authors did not interact with slaves.

- **Women**: Depending on the specific time in ancient Greece, women were mostly relegated to the household. There they enjoyed much freedom, but outdoors they were to be escorted, to cover their heads, and to generally refrain from much of public life (though, to be sure, they did participate in many events). As was possibly the case with Mary and Joseph, Greek girls married around the time of puberty while their husbands were many years older. Ancient Greek society believed that a woman's primary role was to have children, ideally male children. (See, for instance, evidence of this in 1 Timothy 2:15.)

(3) Ancient Greek Religion

Religion extended to every aspect of ancient Greek society. Simply put, anything and everything had a "religious" component since there was no concept of separation between that which was "religious" and that which was "secular." Whether playing sports, eating a meal, going to war, or undertaking a voyage, everything was done with awareness of the divine. And for Christians, this made things very difficult, since everything they did required them to pay tribute to a false god or goddess.

From our perspective, the primary "religious" ritual of the ancient Greeks was sacrifice. The Greeks made sacrifices all the time and for all occasions. And these

sacrifices did not have to be conducted by someone who was morally perfect or believed perfectly.

For instance, what we call "holiness" today or "correct doctrine" did not apply in the same way to ancient Greeks (or ancient Romans). What mattered most was following correct protocol. The sacrifices had to be done the right way, and this mindset has heavily influenced the development of Christianity.

For example, Christianity's two most ancient traditions—Orthodoxy and Catholicism—are inherently ritualistic. In a word, no "worship" takes place in an Orthodox or Catholic Church until a priest dutifully follows the rituals for the Sacraments. Of course, it is hoped and expected that a priest "believes" what he (for there are no women priests in Catholicism or Orthodoxy) says, but what is most important is that he performs the rituals in the right way.

For instance, as Lysias, an ancient Greek wrote, "Our ancestors handed down to us the most powerful and prosperous community in Greece by performing the required sacrifices. It is therefore proper for us to offer the same sacrifices as they" (*Orations* 30.18).

Finally, it is important to understand that the various Greek deities—Zeus, Apollos, Athena, Hermes, and so on—were presumed to be real gods and goddesses that played an inescapable part in people's lives. These deities were worshiped every day, and that did not change until after Christianity became legal.

It is also important to recognize that worship of Greek deities was not mutually exclusive. Unlike Judaism and Christianity, for instance, the Greeks could worship any number of gods or goddesses without fear of jealousy. This very important difference created much bloodshed and division. And it also made Greeks and Romans hate Christians for demanding that their God alone must be worshipped and refusing to honor the pagans's gods.

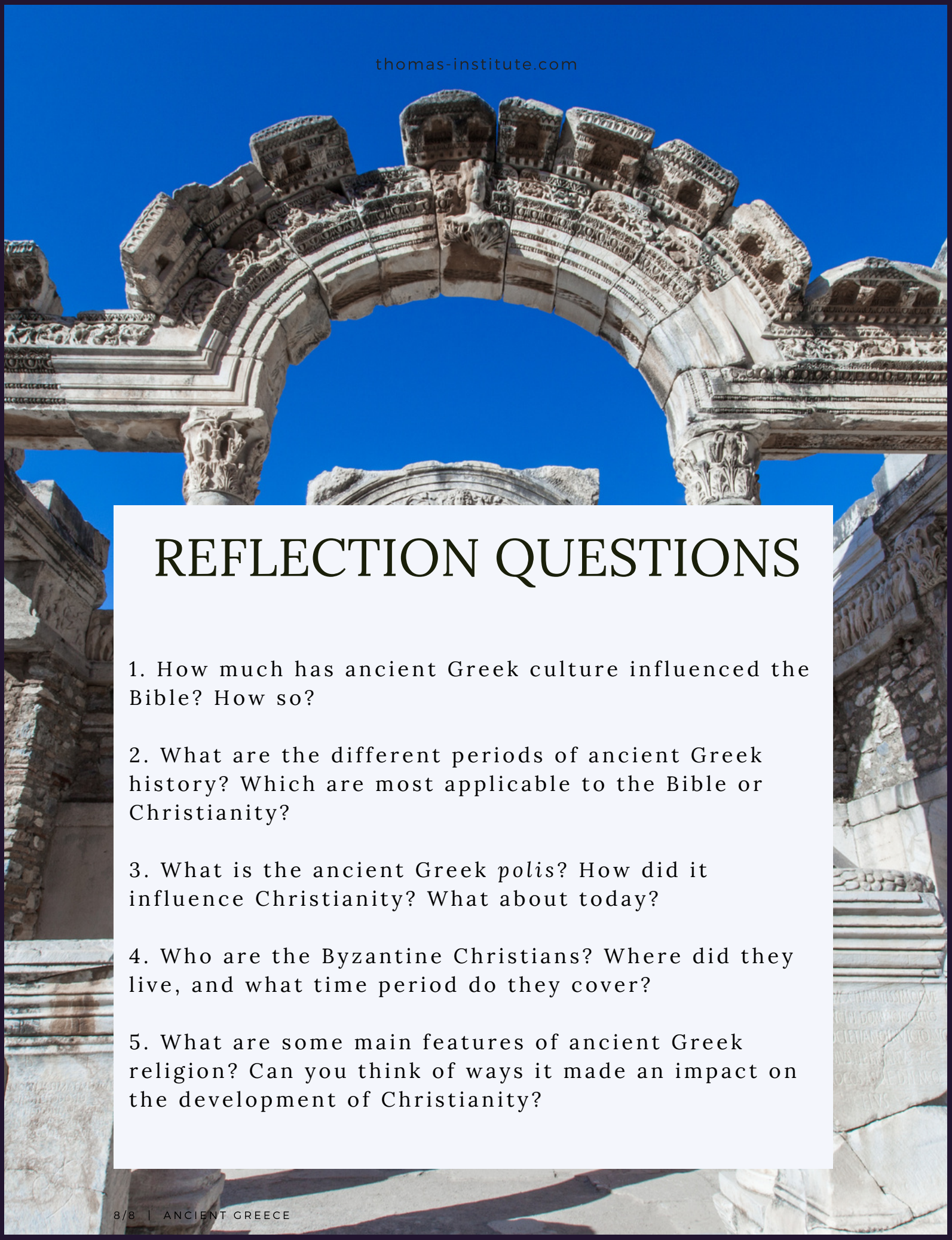






Conclusion

In conclusion, ancient Greek society lasted thousands of years and witnessed unprecedented advances, developments, and innovations. Its influence on the world of the Bible, especially the New Testament, as well as Christianity in general cannot be overestimated. For not only did the ancient Greeks provide the very language of the Bible and Christianity, but they also offered a cultural lens through which the world was seen.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. How much has ancient Greek culture influenced the Bible? How so?

2. What are the different periods of ancient Greek history? Which are most applicable to the Bible or Christianity?

3. What is the ancient Greek *polis*? How did it influence Christianity? What about today?

4. Who are the Byzantine Christians? Where did they live, and what time period do they cover?

5. What are some main features of ancient Greek religion? Can you think of ways it made an impact on the development of Christianity?



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