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Understanding

the Body

in Ancient Cultures

WHEN THE APOSTLE PAUL journeyed to Athens, he found an audience with which to share the gospel. Attracting the attention of Athens' resident philosophers, Paul was taken to the meeting place of the Areopagus (the judicial council of Athens) to explain more about this "new teaching" (Acts 17:19-20, NIV). For some time, both philosophers and citizens of Athens gave an attentive ear as Paul recounted God's salvation history. However, their mood quickly turned to skepticism when Paul proclaimed that God's "appointed" judge had been raised "from the dead" (vv. 31-32).

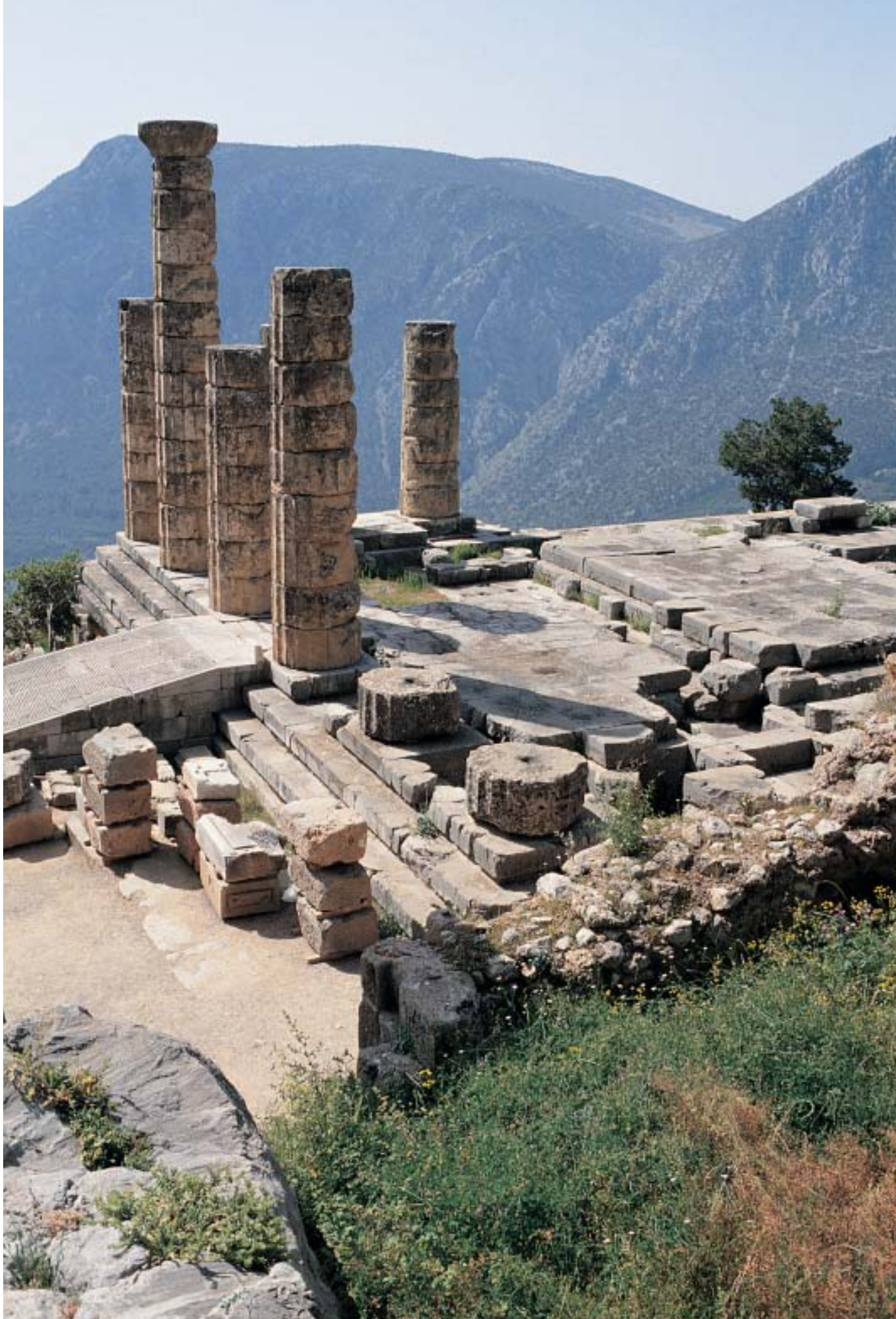
The Athenians' reaction suggested their understanding of human life and the human body differed from the perspective of the gospel. What views of the human body were prevalent in Paul's day? How did these views differ from the teachings of the early church? Exploring the different ways ancient cultures understood the human body helps us recognize some of the obstacles facing first-century Christians in proclaiming and living out

Upper left: A marble statue of Apollo: 2nd century B.C.

Right: Temple of Apollo at Delphi. Apollo, the Greek's sun god, was also the patron god of musicians and poets. Delphi was the chief site of the Apollo oracular shrines. Artists often portrayed a youthful Apollo, naked or robed, with a bow or lyre.

LESSON REFERENCE

FBSC: 1 Corinthians 6:9-20



Left: Stadium area at Rhodes, with center trough in the foreground.

Below: Bust of Plato, who greatly influenced Greek thought about the relationship of body and soul.



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the gospel. The world in which the New Testament began was influenced by three principal approaches to human understanding, each owing its beginning to a different culture (Greek, Roman, and Jewish) and making its own contribution to first-century thinking about the human body.

Greek Culture

The Greek lifestyle was a major influence on people's thoughts in the ancient world. Overall, Grecian culture celebrated both the form and function of the human body, as their Olympic festivals demonstrated. Greek art commonly showed one of its favorite subjects, the human body, in poses illustrating the reality and intensity of life.¹ Athletic competitions promoted the virtues of human endurance, strength, and beauty.² Greek art reflected these ideals by emphasizing a well-built physique, with many works showing an athlete calm and composed even during competition. More often than not, male athletes competed in the nude, and men often exercised naked at gymnasiums, again highlighting the Greeks' opinion of the human body as an object of beauty.³

Greek literature also stressed

the physical. Greek tragedies often portrayed life as a struggle fought mainly in physical ways with a focus on human strength and downplaying divine intervention. Greek comedies illustrated the boundaries of human behavior and capability.

The most significant impact Greek culture had on the perception of the body was through philosophy. Philosophy then was like religion today; philosophical rather than religious teachings provided societal "rules" on how to live.⁴ Plato (ca. 428-348 B.C.), the Greek philosopher, believed and taught that human beings were composed of two separate parts. Each person has an immortal, preexisting soul that is perfect in nature and a physical body with worldly passions and appetites. Plato believed the body's appetites and passions were harmful to the soul, since following one's bodily appetites to excess draws the soul farther away from the perfection it once knew in preexistence. For Plato, to achieve inner harmony, reason had to temper a person's bodily appetites.⁵

Plato's teachings at first sound at odds with the Greek appreciation of the human body, but this is not the case. Discipline of the body was a natural part of athletic training

and competition. Just as an athlete disciplined himself in training to perform well, Plato taught that the soul should discipline the body for a person to live well. The Greeks could celebrate athletic achievements even while acknowledging that body and soul struggled with one another. Placing the body under appropriate discipline was an exercise of the soul's powers in Plato's philosophy. Ultimately, Plato's body/soul concept led to the belief that the body is evil and is the "prison" of the soul.

Roman Culture

Greek philosophy continued to



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Above: Roman baths at Perga. Eight miles from the Mediterranean Sea, Perga prominently housed a temple

to Artemis, the Greek goddess of fertility. On his first missionary journey Paul came to Perga with Barnabas and John Mark.

influence first-century thinking about the body in two opposing philosophies: Epicureanism and Stoicism. Each philosophy had its own followers who spread these teachings throughout the Roman Empire.⁶ Epicurean philosophy rejected the notion of divine intervention in life or death, so each person should strive for happiness in the present by seeking a state of pleasure in the mind and body.⁷ Stoic philosophy believed in an afterlife but argued that a person's destiny cannot be changed. A person finds happiness in learning to control emotion—as emotional reactions to events serve no purpose.⁸ Stoicism taught a denial of human emotions and feelings, while Epicureanism promoted

them. We can thus understand why the men of Athens greeted the concept of the resurrection with such skepticism. If, as the Greeks concluded, the body is the source of evil, strife, and anxiety, why would a person want to see it raised? By Paul's day, many living in the Roman Empire were familiar with these teachings.

The Roman Empire had grown through conquest. Yet each subject nation retained its own religious practices unless those teachings threatened the stability and authority of the empire. Anyone living under Roman rule was free to worship any deity and join any religion he or she wished.⁹ Roman art reflects this emphasis on the majesty of the state through its depiction of persons, who were most often shown in less detailed features than in Greek art. The individual was not as important as the role they had in the empire, and this is reflected in the art. When Roman art portrayed individuals,

it typically did so depicting the person's roles of service to the empire.¹⁰

Hebrew Culture

In this swirl of competing philosophies and religions, the Hebrew view of humanity was unique, as a look at the Old Testament reveals. The Hebrew concept of the person began with the conviction that God created humans in His image (Gen. 1:26) and that we are alive through a deliberate act [that is, the breath of God (Gen. 2:7)] and not because of chance or any preexistent form. As God's creation, the whole person is open before the Creator (1 Sam. 2:3; Ps. 139:1-4), hence the "body/soul" division of Greek philosophy was foreign to Hebrew thought.¹¹ Indeed, the early Hebrew language had no proper term for "body," illustrating this view of personhood as a unity. To the Hebrew mind, human personality, emotions, and intellect were manifest in the "flesh" that God had



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Above: Sacrificial scene of Marcus Aurelius making offerings to the gods. Marcus was Roman's emperor A.D. 161-180. "Meditations," a

work by the classic stoic Marcus Aurelius called for obedience to nature and the suppression or mastery of personal passions.

given life. Made in God's image, the body itself was not evil. God proclaimed it exceedingly good (Gen. 1:31, Hebrew, *tov m'e'od*).

Christian Thinking

As a Hebrew, Paul was no doubt familiar with this understanding of the human body. By the time of the New Testament, two significant events had taken place that brought a new understanding of the human body to the first-century world. First was the development in Hebrew thought of the resurrection and afterlife. Hinted at in the Old Testament (Isa. 26:19; Ezek. 37:1-13; Hos. 6:1-2), these concepts

became even more developed by the first century, but still were a topic of debate (Matt. 22:23; Acts 23:6-8).

The most influential event impacting the understanding of the human body was the incarnation. Confessing Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ (2:36) challenges the philosophies we have described. The classic Greek division of body and soul led to the teaching that the body was evil and had nothing in common with divinity. Pagan philosophers could not comprehend that any divinity would take on a human form. The incarnation not only reinforces the idea that humanity is created in God's image but takes it to a deeper level in Jesus, who is both truly God and truly man.¹² The new identity Paul proclaimed reflected the understanding that the human body could be united with Christ

through the presence of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5). Paul thus urged believers in Rome not to "conform . . . to the pattern of this world"—which in part meant shunning the Roman practice of worshiping various deities—and instead to present their bodies as "living sacrifices" in worship to God (Rom. 12:1-2, NIV). Countering the notion that divinity and the human body have nothing in common, Paul boldly declared God's intention for the body to be given to the Lord, thus making the body "a temple of the Holy Spirit" while avoiding the indulgences excused or encouraged by other religions (1 Cor. 6:13-20).

Human nature has not changed from Paul's time to the present. What is the meaning of life? and What happens when I die? are timeless questions most if not all humans share. The gospel is unique in its affirmation that every human being is created in God's image; and this Creator God is made known to us in Christ, who "being in very nature God . . . made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Phil. 2:6-7, NIV). No pagan philosopher would have ever expressed divine love in this way.¹³

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