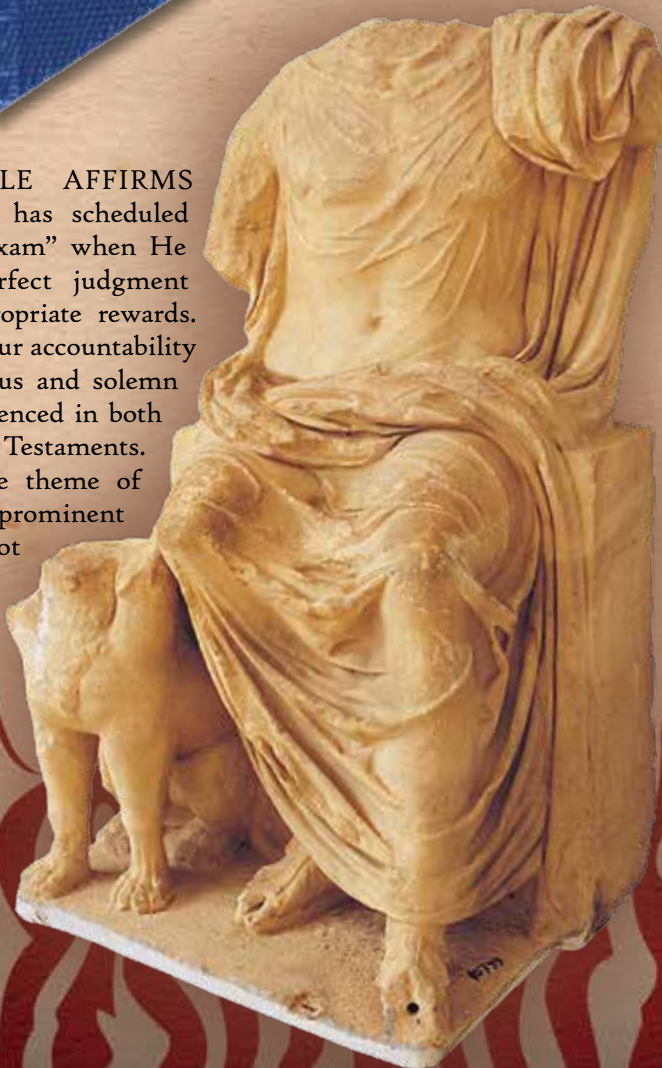




# JUDGMENT *and* REWARD

*By M. Dean Register*

**T**HE BIBLE AFFIRMS that God has scheduled a “final exam” when He will exercise perfect judgment and allocate appropriate rewards. The certainty of our accountability to God is a serious and solemn reality often referenced in both the Old and New Testaments. Consequently, the theme of judgment is so prominent that we dare not overlook it; and the promise of



rewards is so certain that we cannot ignore it. The first book of the Bible refers to God as the “Judge of all the earth” (Gen. 18:25) and the last book of the Bible declares that God will conduct a conclusive evaluation at His “great white throne” (Rev. 20:11).<sup>1</sup>

**Left: From the Roman period, a marble statue of Hades, god of the underworld. Here he is sitting on a throne with his guard dog**

**Cerberus beside him. Cerberus, which means “demon of the pit,” allowed souls to enter the underworld, but never to leave.**

HADES STATUE: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ/ HATAY ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM (12/13/10)

BACKGROUND IMAGES: ISTOCK PHOTO

In order to expand our understanding of “judgment and rewards,” we can briefly examine what the New Testament teaches, survey first-century religious concepts about the afterlife, and then highlight the striking differences between the New Testament emphasis and popular ideas in Greco-Roman culture.

### New Testament Teachings

The New Testament clearly declares that God has “set a day” to adjudicate the deeds and decisions of every person (Acts 17:31; Rom. 2:16; 1 Cor. 4:5; 2 Pet. 3:7; 1 John 4:17). Furthermore God has appointed “the Man” Christ Jesus to carry out His judgment (Acts 17:31; 2 Tim. 4:1). Consequently, readers cannot miss the significance of Jesus’ exclusive right to judge.<sup>2</sup> Jesus stated, “The Father...has given all judgment to the Son” and “anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him” (John 5:22-23).

Unlike a human court that occasionally makes a serious mistake and fails to exercise proper justice, the judgment by the “Sovereign Lord” (Rev. 6:10, ESV) will be pure, full of truth, inerrant, thorough, and complete.

In what manner, however, will Christ-followers be judged? Will believers face the same scrutiny that unbelievers face? Indeed, the New Testament testifies that

“each of us will give an account of himself to God” (Rom. 14:12) and that “we must all appear before the tribunal of Christ, so that each may be repaid for what he has done in the body, whether good or worthless” (2 Cor. 5:10). Similarly, Matthew 16:24-28 and 1 Peter 4:1-2, 12-19 underscore the judgment that comes to believers as “God’s household” and that Jesus will examine everyone, whether believer or unbeliever “according to what he has done.”

Does this indicate that works are essential to salvation and that human performance can earn God’s favor? In a word, No.

When eager seekers asked Jesus what they could do to perform the works of God, Jesus replied, “This is the work of God—that you believe

in the One He has sent” (John 6:29). Although all individuals will be subject to God’s comprehensive examination, the fundamental act of justification by grace through faith makes the eternal and definitive difference for those who believe and rely upon Jesus. Believers are justified by faith as the New Testament asserts, but they are judged by their fruit. Although works are not meritorious for salvation, they are an evidence of salvation. The works of a believer that are most pleasing to God are those done in faith and with a conviction that there is no merit other than that which Christ alone accomplishes through us. Consequently, the New Testament does not even imply that salvation depends upon one’s service for God.<sup>3</sup>

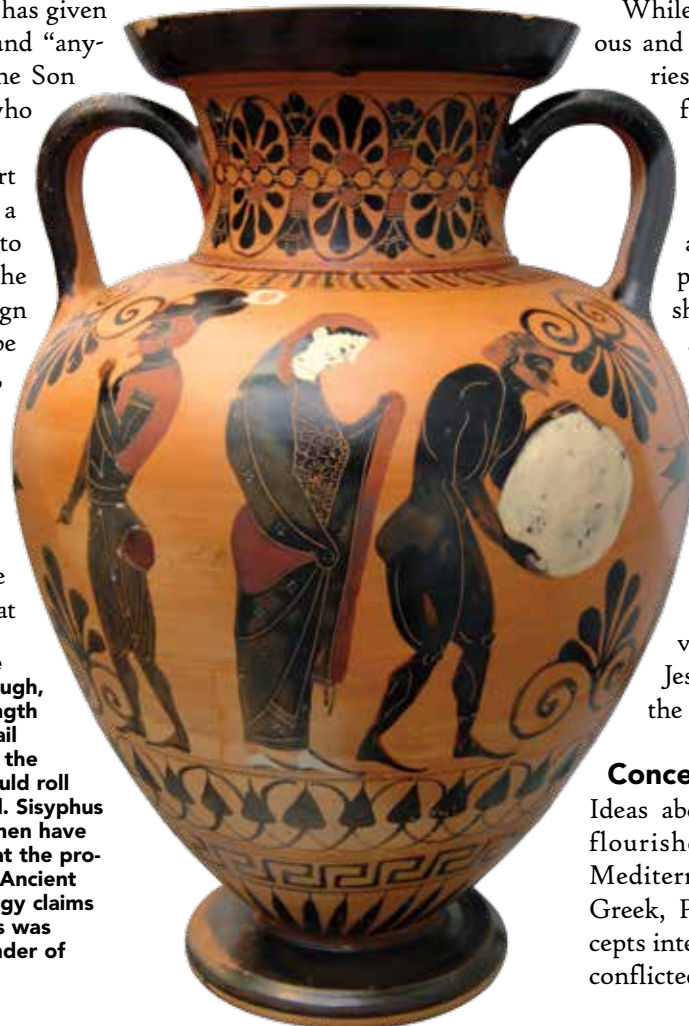
While judgment carries a serious and punitive aspect, it also carries a positive recompense for faithful believers. The role of rewards highlights the benefits of obedience to Christ and serves as encouragement to believers to be persistent through life’s hardships and fiery trials. Rewards are a recognition that God bestows in His future kingdom for both a disposition of Christ-likeness and a demonstration of devotion to Christ’s glory. Rewards to believers are intended to reflect not so much the worth of the individual but the worthiness of Jesus working in and through the individual.<sup>4</sup>

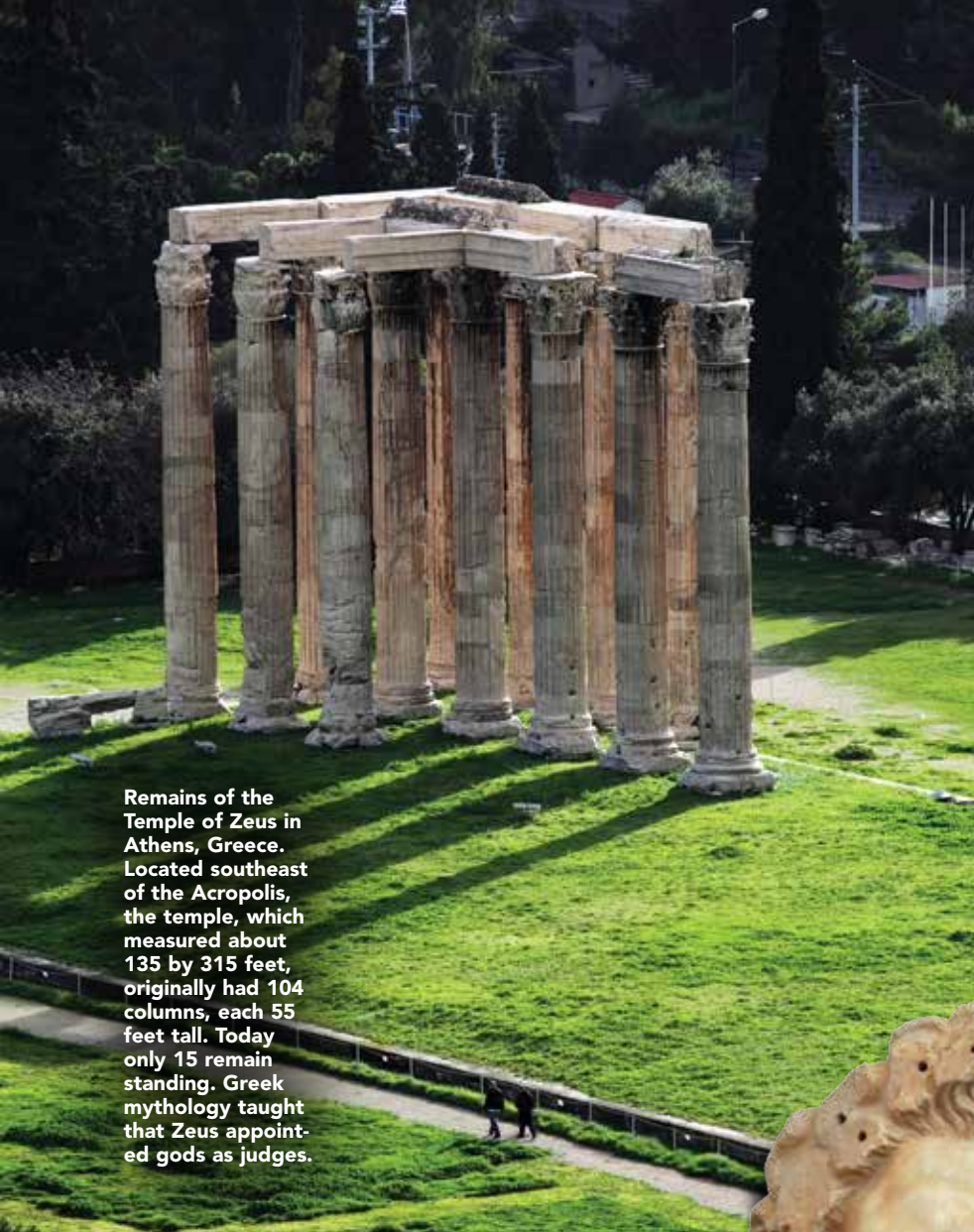
### Concepts of the Afterlife

Ideas about judgment and rewards flourished in first-century Mediterranean culture. Roman, Greek, Persian, and Egyptian concepts intersected with and inevitably conflicted with Christian teaching.

**Right: Sisyphus on a Greek amphora; according to Greek mythology, Sisyphus gave assistance to an enemy of Zeus. As punishment, Zeus condemned Sisyphus to an eternal punishment of rolling a boulder uphill. Each time he was**

**near the top, though, his strength would fail him and the rock would roll downhill. Sisyphus would then have to repeat the procedure. Ancient mythology claims Sisyphus was the founder of Corinth.**





Remains of the Temple of Zeus in Athens, Greece. Located southeast of the Acropolis, the temple, which measured about 135 by 315 feet, originally had 104 columns, each 55 feet tall. Today only 15 remain standing. Greek mythology taught that Zeus appointed gods as judges.

ISTOCK PHOTO



**Right:** From Achaia, outside of Athens, Greece, a colossal head of Zeus statue. The piece, which the Athenian sculptor Eukleides carved, belonged to a larger than life-size cult statue of the god. The original eyes would have been made of a different material and inlaid; from 2nd cent. B.C.

Greek philosophy popularized by Epicurean leaders (Acts 17:18) emphasized happiness and pleasure as the chief goals of life and an acceptance of death as a fatalistic conclusion.<sup>5</sup> Greek mythology penetrated Roman society to the extent that many people in Roman-occupied areas embraced afterlife ideas associated with Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades. Zeus ruled the heavens, while Poseidon ruled the sea, and Hades ruled the realm of the dead.<sup>6</sup>

Numerous cults functioned as secretive religions with mysterious teachings about immortality that promised bliss to initiates who entered into unity with the deity. One Egyptian religion that spread

across the Roman Empire centered around the deities of Isis and Osiris. Isis served as the sister and lover of Osiris. When Osiris was murdered, Isis located his corpse and performed a reanimation of his dead body. As a result Isis came to

be viewed as the cosmic “mistress of heaven,” and Osiris assumed his role as ruler of the underworld.<sup>7</sup>

Whereas superstition abounded among many individuals in the first century, so also did the belief that the soul survived physical death. Greco-Roman literature indicates that judgment after death was generally assumed and that recompense corresponded to a moral responsibility before death.<sup>8</sup>

Mediterranean people shared a common conviction that the dead went to a giant cavity under the earth. Jews called this locale *sheol*; the Greeks and Romans referred to it as *hades*. There the souls of the dead remained until their time of judgment regarding their eternal fate. The Roman poet Virgil wrote in the *Aeneid* a description of the afterlife that a wide variety of citizens embraced. After an initial, temporary period in the underworld, a person would cross the mythical river Styx and arrive at the court of judgment. If the court found a person to be pious and devout, then the reward was everlasting bliss in the Elysian Fields. If, however, a person was found to be wicked, the reward was punishment in Tartarus.<sup>9</sup>

Like Virgil among the Romans, the influence of Homer among the Greeks was significant to educated citizens concerning their understanding of the afterlife. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, he described a journey to the underworld where Odysseus saw Tantalus being punished with unquenchable thirst as he stood in a pool of water. Every time Tantalus tried to drink the water it receded out of his reach. Furthermore, Odysseus saw

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/G.B. HOWELL/ATHENS ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM (35/1/99)



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ G.B. HOWELL/ LOUVRE MUSEUM/ PARIS (35/7/82)

**Left:** Stela shows the Egyptian priest Khonsouirdis and his wife (on the right) as they pray to Osiris (left center) and Isis (far left); limestone; dated 8th–7th centuries B.C.


**Below:** This pair of bronze, wheel-like objects are copies of jurors' ballots excavated



in a law court building in the ancient marketplace of classical Athens. They are each inscribed in Greek, PSEPHOS DEMOSIA, translated "Official Ballot." The hub of the wheel of one ballot is pierced through, while the other is solid. The solid ballot meant acquittal; the

pierced one indicated guilty. The juror would cast his vote in secret holding his fingers over the hub of each ballot. He would deposit his choice in the official receptacle and toss the other in the discard bin. These are the earliest examples of secret balloting preserved from ancient Greece.

Christ and trust Him for salvation enter heaven. Those who choose to reject Christ incur the consequence of eternal separation in hell.

Fourth, rewards for Christ-followers are evidences of life transformation rather than rites of initiation. Rewards for believers are not prizes for boasting but are honors of faithfulness given by the One called "Faithful and True" (Rev. 19:11). 

Sisyphus laboriously rolling a great stone up a hill, only to have the stone always roll down forcing him to begin again.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the influence of poetic imagery among the elite in the first-century, the common majority held a hazy comprehension of where the soul went after death. They held onto two prevailing beliefs—that a person's essence continued in the afterlife, and the soul continued to live in a favorable existence beyond the grave.<sup>11</sup>

### The Ultimate Differences

Obviously striking differences separate the New Testament emphases about judgment and rewards from the popular concepts that circulated in first-century Greco-Roman culture. First, the New Testament declares a historic event in the death and resurrection of Jesus. While ancient mythology speculated about life after death, the New Testament

proclaims a reality that is attested by eye-witness accounts

(1 Cor. 15:5-8) and verifiable activities. This event is crucial to the subject of judgment and rewards because one's eternal destiny depends upon the acceptance or rejection of Jesus as Savior and Lord.

Second, in first-century culture, many people considered any eternal rewards to be based upon meritorious actions that solicited the gods' favor. The New Testament presents a sharp contrast to such pagan ideology by affirming that no one can earn heaven or God's favor through politics, prosperity, or piety (Rom. 3:9-10,20-23).

Third, the destination of individuals after death, while generally hazy and sometime uncertain in Greco-Roman culture, is clear and precise in the New Testament. Those who place their faith in

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB).
2. Mark A. Seifrid, "Judgment" in *Dictionary of Later New Testament and Its Development*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 623.
3. Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 862.
4. Ruth M. Fuller, "Rewards" in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 819-20.
5. Andreas J. Kostenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2009), 89.
6. Jack Finegan, *Myth and Mystery: An Introduction to the Pagan Religions of the Biblical World* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1989), 159-65, 191-93.
7. Jan Assmann, "Isis" in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, ed. Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter van der Horst, 2nd rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 456-58.
8. J. M. C. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1971), 36.
9. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 249.
10. Hans-Josef Klauck, *The Religious Context of Early Christianity*, trans. Brian McNeil (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 74-75.
11. Toynbee, *Death and Burial in the Roman World*, 38.

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