

One of the favorite themes throughout history in religion, literature, and art has been the theme of immortality or the escape from death and the extension of one's time. The belief in life after death is based on the notion that some part of the human person, usually described as the soul, goes on for an infinite period of time. This is a quest that has produced many stories and is the basis for many systems of belief.

The fascination people have with their own mortality is not a new phenomenon. The literature of the ancient Greeks mentions it frequently. One of the most well-known scenes in ancient Greek philosophy is Socrates' deathbed speech. Most of what we know about Socrates comes from Plato's account of this speech. Stories of the River Styx and Hades illustrate the early Greek ideas of mortality and death.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Hebrew scriptures provide insight into the concept of mortality as understood by the ancient Hebrews, whose focus was very much on this world; little is said about the notion of an afterlife. A similar outlook underlies many of the beliefs and practices found in modern Judaism. With the advent of Christianity, however, ideas of the afterlife took on greater importance. Islam, which shares the Abrahamic tradition with Judaism and Christianity, also finds the basis of some of its beliefs about an afterlife in these early traditions.

In the Asian religious and philosophical traditions, reincarnation is a concept that takes on major importance; to be reincarnated is seen as a form of prolonging life, but in Hinduism and Buddhism, the cycle of endless reincarnation is understood as a form of bondage that the enlightened hope to escape into a state of nonbeing, thus attaining true immortality.

In popular culture, a continuing fascination with mortality and the human desire to escape the finality of death manifests itself in the current interests in ghosts, mediums, and other psychic phenomena. In an age when tangible evidence is often needed for people to believe in something, some are trying to find tangible evidence to prove the existence of life beyond death.

Science, too, is subject to a concern with mortality and the search for ways to overcome it. Studies in genetics have made some previously fatal diseases treatable. Advances in certain medical

technologies have made physical life sustainable in cases where it previously would not have been. This has given rise to the debate over exactly what constitutes life.

In the health care and insurance industries, mortality usually refers to the measurement of life expectancy. Mortality rates, which assess the frequency of death occurring annually in a given population, have declined substantially over the last century in many countries because of progress in science, medicine, and sanitation.

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See also Cryonics; Diseases, Degenerative; Dying and Death; Fertility Cycle; Gerontology; Grim Reaper; Life Cycle; Longevity

#### Further Readings

- Lief, J. L. (2001). *Making friends with death: A Buddhist guide to encountering mortality*. Boston: Shambhala.  
 Tarlow, S. (1999). *Bereavement and commemoration: An archeology of mortality*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

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## MOSES

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Moses is the most prominent figure in the Hebrew Bible, or Pentateuch. He is noted for receiving the law from God and for leading the Israelites out of bondage in Egypt to the promised land. Being such a pivotal figure, Moses plays an important role in later Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions. Through the centuries, Moses has been a prominent subject in art, literature, and, in modern times, film; even, most recently, as a toy action figure based on the young Moses as depicted in an animated movie.

Moses's life as described in the Bible is fairly straightforward. He was a Hebrew born in Egypt, raised by the pharaoh's daughter, and trained in the Egyptian court. Following an incident in which he killed an Egyptian who was abusing a Hebrew slave, Moses fled for his life toward Midian, where he lived 40 years. Moses received a calling to deliver the enslaved Israelites when he encountered God at a burning bush at Mt. Sinai. Upon returning to Egypt, he had several confrontations with an unnamed pharaoh accompanied by a series of