Name: _____

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ANCIENT GREECE
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The Early Greek Philosophers

A philosopher is anyone who uses reason to make sense of the world. The ancient Greeks spent centuries doing exactly that — discussing, debating, and studying wisdom. They even named the habit: philosophy, from a Greek term meaning "the love of wisdom."

Guided by the Gods

Before the sixth century BCE, Greeks explained the universe through mythology. Zeus threw lightning bolts, while Poseidon shook the earth.

Oracles were priests whom many Greeks believed could read the will of the gods in clues left in rustling oak leaves or animal livers. At Epidaurus, the sick slept inside the sanctuary of Asclepius, hoping the god of medicine would send a cure through their dreams.

The Oracle at Delphi was a priestess whom Greeks believed spoke for Apollo. Rulers and cities consulted her before waging war or founding colonies. For centuries, Delphi was one of Greece's most important religious sites. Her answers, often remembered as riddles, were vague enough to be right no matter what happened next.

The First Philosophers

People may have had doubts, but until Thales, nobody proposed an alternative. Thales argued that water was the source of everything in nature. Anaximenes thought it was air, which could thicken into wind, water, and stone or thin into fire. Whether these thinkers were right matters less than the fact that they were beginning the search for truth.

Heraclitus and Change

Instead of searching for a fixed substance, Heraclitus denied that anything ever stood still. He argued that change itself was the only constant. No one steps into the same river twice, he wrote — the water moves, and so does the person who steps into it. Fire was his model for the universe: always burning, never still, consuming one thing to feed another.

Pythagoras and Numbers

Pythagoras suggested that the universe could be distilled into numbers rather than a substance. He argued that numbers were the hidden architecture behind music, the movements of the stars, and the ratios that made chords beautiful. Pluck two strings, one twice the length of the other, and they sound in perfect harmony — the octave, hiding inside a simple 2:1 ratio. Pythagoras reasoned that since numbers governed sound, they were the key to understanding reality.

The Sophists

The Sophists were traveling teachers in fifth-century BCE Athens. They charged fees to teach rhetoric — the art of persuasive speaking — to young, ambitious Athenians who needed to sway the assembly, since Athenian democracy ran on public speech and there were no lawyers to hire. Truth, to a Sophist, mattered less than victory. Protagoras, the most famous of them, argued that "man is the measure of all things" — that truth itself bent to the individual rather than standing fixed. Critics accused the Sophists of teaching students to win an argument regardless of the truth, prizing clever technique over honest reasoning. The word for that kind of hollow cleverness survives today: sophistry.

Philosophy Spreads

These ideas were not taught in formal schools. In the ancient world, education was reserved for the sons of wealthy Greeks, who were taught by private tutors. Word of a compelling new idea spread the way gossip does — through travel, reputation, and conversation in a Greek world small enough for news to reach every port city. A rich family might send a promising son to study under a famous name. Greek philosophy did not arrive in a classroom. It arrived on a ship, carried by whoever had heard the argument first and thought it worth repeating.

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Fill in the Blanks

Philosophy means "the l__ve of w__s__om." Greek philosophers used r__a__on to make sense of the world. Before the sixth century BCE, the Greeks explained *n__tur__l events through m__t__o__o__y and sought the gods' will through o__a__l__s. Rulers and cities often consulted a priestess at D__l__hi whom they believed spoke for the god A__o__lo. Thales offered a new kind of explanation, arguing that w__t__r was the source of e__e__y__hi__g in n__t__re. Anaximenes instead identified a__r. Heraclitus taught that ch__n__e was the only c__n__t__nt, comparing life to a r__v__r whose water never stops m__v__ng. Pythagoras believed n__m__ers explained m__s__c, the stars, and reality itself. The S__p__i__ts traveled through A__h__ns teaching r__e__o__ic, the art of persuasive s__e__k__ng. Critics said the S__p__is__s cared more about winning a__g__m__n__s than t__u__h; this hollow cleverness became known as s__p__i__t__y.

Answer in Complete Sentence

1. Why was it often difficult to prove that the Oracle at Delphi was wrong?

*2. Heraclitus argued that a person would never step into the same river twice. What did he mean? If you can, use a real example from your life to explain what Heraclitus meant.

3. What did Pythagoras believe governed the universe?

*4. Use sophistry to convince someone in your life to do something that may that they not want to do.

*This is a higher order learning question. You must answer the question to the best of your ability, but any reasonable answer will be graded as correct.

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