

History of Greek Religion: Homer Creates the Olympians

By Bill Heid



Homer's Odyssey plays a major role in the history of Greek religion. [1]

History of Greek Religion – Homer and the Creation of the Olympians

A fascinating part of the history of Greek religion involves the [Hellenic tribes](#) [2] entering what we now call Greece in successive waves. Some came more or less peacefully. Some came as conquerors. In their migrations, these tribes of necessity left behind the ancestral gods that were tied to their former lands. Only the greater "nature gods" who transcended former local history and memory made the cut and could cross into Greece. Zeus was the chief of these. But it's important to know that Zeus was himself a compilation of various smaller and local Zeuses, all of whom represented the storms and the sky.

Yet, in the new land, migrating Greeks also discovered new gods and added them to their list of gods. They also took up foreign gods from time to time... Aphrodite, for instance, was a Greek version of Ishtar and Astarte. "Rites and forms of belief which the immigrants brought with them and others which they learned became associated, as circumstances directed, with one god or another." [1] In other words, they made up their religion as they went along. However, Zeus remained the principal god, the king over all gods. Over time, as the history of Greek religion progressed, Homer began constructing the Greek pantheon.

The Pillars of the Pantheon

The critical keys to that process were the concepts of anthropomorphism and rationalism. Anthropomorphism gave human form to the gods. It ascribed to the gods human will and emotion. Eventually, it gave the gods a history and even a family tree. Rationalism tried to make all the assumptions that undergirded Greek religion coexist in some sensible balance.

Both anthropomorphism and religious rationalism found their finest Hellenic expression in Homer. Homer trimmed back the existing ancestor worship and magic in favor of a more rational universe. He gives the gods consistency, history, and personal psychologies. Homer sets the gods in a real universe and makes them interact with more or less historical characters. Homer basically shows us polytheism in a more developed form. And in the process, he eliminates many of the previous and more primitive expressions of classical religion.

Religion in Homer – The Absence of Ancestor Worship and Magic

First, in Homer, the worship of the dead no longer appears in its boldest form. "In Homer, the cult of the dead is lacking, and the customs and ideas associated with it have been pushed into the background and considerably reduced." [2] It seems, at first glance, that Homer's anthropomorphic gods have pushed aside the older family and ancestral gods along with all the daemons. The foggy underworld of the grave seems to give way in Homer to Hades, a still somewhat foggy and grey underworld, but now modeled after human kingdoms. Nevertheless, things are not always as they seem.

In most cultures, there is often a decided difference between public religion and private conviction. The chthonic gods, the gods of the underworld, weren't dead yet. (More on this later)

Second, "magic is practically absent from Homer: there are only faint traces." [3] As Homer made the gods increasingly human, the previously bizarre world of magic receded into the background. And when Homer killed off magic, he also eliminated the possibility of manipulating the gods through the irrational powers of magic. Nonetheless, this didn't place the gods beyond manipulation. Rather, it simply shut out ritual magic as normative.

The Continuity of Being and the Relationship between Gods and Men

Third, as in all pagan religions, Homer assumes the continuity of being. All of ordered reality comes from chaos, and so the gods are not fundamentally different from men in their being. "The gods are stronger, wiser, more powerful than men, but this is a mere question of degree." [4] Homer develops this very seriously and self-consciously. But he also develops it as a joke at times. For example, consider the warrior Diomedes stabbing crybaby goddess Aphrodite. For Homer, the only solid dividing line between man and the gods is immortality. Men die and the gods don't. But it also turns out that this gap is psychologically unbridgeable. Men can't relate well to immortal super-beings.

Fourth, the switch from the family worship of dead ancestors to the big canvas of epic literature brought the gods and humans into an open relationship with each other. In Homer, the gods interact in real time and real history with one another and with their human subjects. And it's right here that we see more clearly the limitations of Homer's gods.

History of Greek Religion – Morality among the Greeks

Both in Homer and in the previous nature gods, the gods presented in classical culture lack three qualities we normally associate with deity... omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence. Like the earlier nature-gods from which they evolved, the Olympians can only be in one place at a time. They are also extremely limited in their knowledge, although they often know some important things that humans don't. And the authority and power of the gods are limited by the gods' own natures and the role they play in the Olympian hierarchy. No god is sovereign in classical religion, ultimately not even Zeus.

These limitations lead to another crucial implication: The gods of Olympus have no real sense of morality. Homer shows us this vividly. "Homer's consistent anthropomorphism represents the gods as possessing every human need and weakness." [5] The gods lie and steal. The Olympians commit adultery and even rape as they please. Homer's gods lose their tempers and take sides against each other. Their sense of morality doesn't rise above that of the average tyrant or playground bully.

For earlier and traditional Hellenic religion, this isn't even a surprise. The natural man comes to the gods for insurance and favors, not for ethical absolutes. He brings bribes. Man works angles. He makes offers and tries to cut deals. "When man turns to the gods, he bases his appeal not upon his present frame of mind and the moral worth of his actions, but upon his divine descent and connexions with the gods, the favor they have formerly shown him, his offerings, gifts, and promises. In the cult, the moral element falls into the background, for there man or the community is alone with its god; the others are strangers or foes, in respect of whom moral considerations do not apply." [6]

Greek Hubris and the “Fear Of God”

The gods provide no universal moral code. In fact, they provide no moral code at all. But the gods of Olympus, like sociopaths, are often angry, irritable, and unpredictable. And eventually, folks learn not to go out of their way to annoy them.

There is one vice, however, that the Greeks quickly learned not to bring to the gods’ notice, and that vice is pride... what the Greeks called hubris. The gods were by nature envious and suspicious of man’s ambitions, his boasts, and his often reckless self-confidence.

Men ought to know their place. That said, classical religion’s “fear of god” is still a far cry from anything like a developed system of divinely appointed ethics. At best, it’s a “practical” form of ethics which is simply rooted in the fear of consequences. The Greeks feared [the gods](#) [3] just as we fear a bully, a corrupt local sheriff, or a humorless bureaucrat. But there is nothing here related to transcendent ethics... nothing connected to absolute right and wrong.

History of Greek Religion – Homer as a Rationalist

Homer also moved the ancient myths toward a more consistent anthropomorphism. His gods do not simply take on the appearance of men. They are glorified men. Their psychology is utterly human. Only in “irrational fickleness” do they differ from today’s big-time CEOs, rock stars, and professional athletes. Further, they are not far from our own conception of superheroes and supervillains. Because they freely ignore conventional morality, they could easily fall into any of these categories.

The Homeric age inherited gods with the weaknesses of primitive gods and myths with the fantastic and inconsequential characteristics of primitive tales. It did not erect any religious system but it remodeled its inheritance in accordance with two predominating lines of thought: anthropomorphism and rationalism. The latter played into the hands of the former by removing all the elements of the supernatural and wonderful, and by refashioning the inherited myths in accordance with human standards. It also went farther than that. Rationalism, combined with the Homeric man’s self-assertive confidence in his own power, took the first steps toward the overthrow of religion. It substituted the eternal sleep for the other life and cast doubt upon the omens of the gods.[7]

Conclusion – The Legacy of Homer

In the Iliad especially, but also in the Odyssey, Homer gave the Greeks and the world a magnificent picture of the Olympian gods. But in magnifying the gods, he highlighted all their imperfections, poked at their implicit humanity, and even called into question their deity.

Overall, a consistently developed anthropomorphism is Homer’s legacy within the history of Greek religion. It was a splendid but contradictory legacy which the Greek religion never could overcome. The attempt to set up an ethical boundary between gods and men was diverted by anthropomorphism into the idea of the jealousy of the gods. It was an idea over which the Greeks wearied their brains in vain, for religious feeling could never rest content with it.[8]

Homer undercut the cult of ancestor worship, highlighted the inadequacy of the gods as moral authorities, and took ritualistic magic out of the hands of gods and men alike. He gave his gods form and substance, and then he put them into play.

But in the inevitable process, He also set the stage for the death of his own Olympic religion. What was to come next, no one could have foreseen.

For Further Reading

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The gods are human, in fact too human. Anthropomorphism is the distinguishing mark of Homer and all later Greek religion.

—Martin P. Nilsson, *A History of Greek Religion*.

One of the most firmly-established and widespread marketing policies in the comic book industry is the humanization of superheroes as a strategy to achieve success. . . .

—M. Addis & G. Troilo, "Humanizing a Superhero" (2016)

Footnotes:

[1] Martin P. Nilsson, *A History of Greek Religion*, page 133.

[2] *Ibid.*, 135-136.

[3] *Ibid.*, 156.

[4] *Ibid.*, 157.

[5] *Ibid.*

[6] *Ibid.*, 154.

[7] *Ibid.*, 178.

[8] *Ibid.*

URLs in this article:

[1] Image: https://www.offthegridnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/AdobeStock_41470645.jpeg

[2] Hellenic tribes: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ancient_Greek_tribes

[3] the gods: <https://www.offthegridnews.com/religion/greek-and-roman-gods/>

URL to article: <https://www.offthegridnews.com/religion/history-greek-religion/>