

At first glance, the religion of ancient Greece must seem quite alien to modern eyes. Our very approach towards religion differs drastically from the Greeks: modern monotheism as opposed to ancient polytheism, our professional clergy in contrast to ordinary citizens performing priestly functions, our formal doctrines and a religion that had no organized creed at all. But the most startling difference surely is that between our concept of a moral deity and the ancient Greek concept of deities that were often immoral and amoral--gods, in fact, that behaved in a most "ungodly" way.

The most famous of these Greek gods are certainly the so-called Olympians, presided over by the chief god, Zeus. Living in the never-never-land of Mount Olympus in Northern Greece, these deities feasted on nectar and ambrosia, enjoyed active love lives, and bickered amongst themselves constantly. As depicted in the Iliad and Odyssey of Homer, they would seem to us to be more at home in a modern situation comedy than in a religious system.

Zeus, for example, in myth is continuously at odds with his wife (and sister) Hera. Although Zeus is the "King of the Gods and Men", myths usually portray him as a hen-pecked husband or an ancient Casanova in pursuit of anything female. No wonder that Hera and he produced Ares, the God of War and Strife, as their only offspring! Zeus, however, had numerous paramours, and from them were born his other divine children: Hermes, the messenger god; Apollo, the god of poetry and music; Artemis, goddess of the hunt; Dionysus, the god of wine; and Athena, goddess of wisdom.

Hera, not to be outdone, produced a child of her own, Hephaestus, the god of the forge. Hephaestus, although the ugliest god on Olympus, grew up to marry none other than Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty, in what must be a most ancient version of the legend of Beauty and the Beast. From this union came Eros, more famous today under his Roman guise of Cupid, the youthful god who causes hapless mortals to fall in love.

There were also powerful deities who were the brothers and sisters of Zeus. For example, Poseidon, the god of the sea, was Zeus' brother and as powerful in his realm of the ocean as

Zeus was in the realm of heaven; Demeter, the sister of Zeus, was the goddess of grain and fertility, whose daughter was Persephone. When Persephone was stolen by Hades, the brother of Zeus and god of the underworld, Demeter in her grief withheld grain from mankind until her child was restored.

These Olympian gods, according to Greek myth, were frequently interfering in the lives of mortals, helping their favourites and harming their enemies. The hero Odysseus, for example, angered Poseidon by putting out the eye of Poseidon's son, the Cyclops Polyphemos; as a result, Poseidon kept Odysseus from reaching his home in Ithaca for many years. Only the help of his patroness, Athena, eventually enabled Odysseus to return home.

Since these gods did interfere in the affairs of human beings, it became of utmost importance to the ancient Greeks to keep them well pleased with mortals. To understand their will and do their bidding, the Greeks consulted oracles (such as the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi), and learned to interpret divine omens (such as the flight of birds or the flashing of lightning). Moreover, every family normally had a small shrine in their house, where they could make offerings to the gods to ensure their good will and blessing. In addition, there were elaborate public ceremonies, including animal sacrifices, in each city-state of Greece.

It is important to realize that the ancient Greeks did not look upon their gods as frivolous clowns, despite the curious myths that arose. Zeus to them was neither a dominated husband nor an amorous old fool; he was the arbiter of their lives and thus was worthy of great honour. It was, in fact, only in the time of the philosopher Plato that Greek thinkers began to question the amoral natures of the Olympians and to demand more moral behaviour from divinity. Meanwhile, the myths of the gods continued to delight the Greeks and to inspire their poets, leaving us today an immensely rich heritage.