

The Greek Gods caused more
trouble than good when they
intervened in the Lives of
Mortals

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Gods, Goddesses, Villains, Heroes and heaven: the life of your average Greek could never have been simple. God, work, school, shops and the media: the life of your average 21st Century girl couldn't have been more different.

The modern concept of God is very different to what the ancient Greeks thought. From a modern perspective we could be very shallow and say they only ruined the lives of mortals, turned other Gods against that particular mortal or were unfair to them in some way. In the Judeo- Christian tradition we spell God with a capital 'G' because God's footprints are everywhere, he is everything, everywhere and everyone. The Greeks spelt God with a small 'g' because:

- i. There are more than one of them
- ii. God isn't everything because his role is shared between many others.

I asked some girls in my class how they viewed God and here were the results:

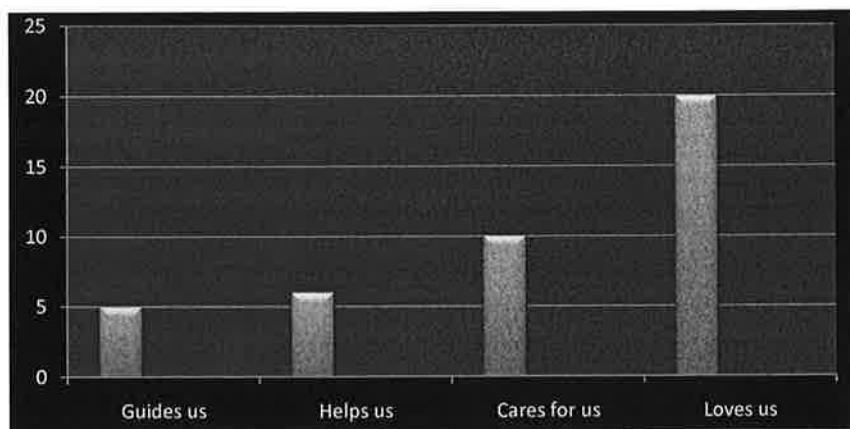


Figure 1: this shows 31 girls views on who God is today

Gods viewed mortals as their 'pets.' They were mildly upset when their favourite pet, but after a hot soak in the bath tub and a cup of tea everything was tolerable again. Every town's dream was to have the founder of their town somehow related to a god, for it brought great pride, and if any god was to be related to your founder why not Zeus, king of the gods? So rumours spread,

surely if Zeus was the father of the founder of your town he must have committed sexual infidelity against Hera, his wife. So stories spread of Hera's vengeance. For a god must be appalled when her husband cheats on a mortal when she herself is far above this and divine. Humans then felt Zeus had sinned which made him less perfect. So if he was less perfect they could sympathise with him and compare him to their own standards. It was from there that humans started to ascribe human feelings to gods, linking their gods to their own emotions, clothing their gods with new found sympathy and vengeance, making them somehow, more human and less distant

Today we may see God as someone who loves and guides us but back in the Greek times they didn't see their gods in that way. Gods and goddesses had short fuses, normal emotions, it was expected that these gods did exactly what they wanted when they wanted to. They had to win their gods' favour. They called on their gods daily for little things to give them hope before the day started just like us today. Gods behaved like normal people- some were fickle, other cruel and some kind. A fair few favoured particular mortals and helped them to gain a place among the heroes of Greek Mythology while other punished those who offended them with great severity. The Greeks knew that their gods had faults rather like they did, in fact it was possibly even expected that their gods may let them down in some way. That doesn't mean they didn't respect their gods, just take a look at the Parthenon and you will be able to see their dedication to their gods.

Comment [s1]: For an example take Zeus and Alcmena. Zeus wanted to sleep with Alcmena, but Alcmena wanted to remain faithful to her husband. So Zeus disguised himself as her husband so he could sleep with her.

Comment [s2]: They called to their God particularly in childbirth, famine and disease.



Figure 2: The Parthenon which is dedicated to the Goddess Athena

We now have a better understanding of the modern concept of a god and how the Greeks viewed their gods and goddesses. Perhaps, first of all we should consider how normal Greek life

was affected by the gods and goddesses and what they had to do every day to please the gods and goddesses.



Figure 3: The birth of Athena, taken from the Musée de Louvre, France, Paris, Dates from: 570- 565 BC, this is side 1 of three.

Every normal Greek house had an altar inside it for family worship, just like a Hindu family. People burnt incense there, made offerings of food and said prayers to selected gods and goddesses they felt could help them best. People would visit the temple that was thought of as home of that god or goddess. It had a chamber where a statue of a god/ goddess would stand. Unlike today the temples would hold no services like we have i.e. there was no Liturgy to be spoken or worship songs, however they did have big festivals like the Panathenaia. Priests and Priestesses were appointed to perform daily rituals such as burning incense or presenting food offerings. People would visit the temples at least once a day. The Greeks prayed to their gods for help and were quite a god fearing nation.

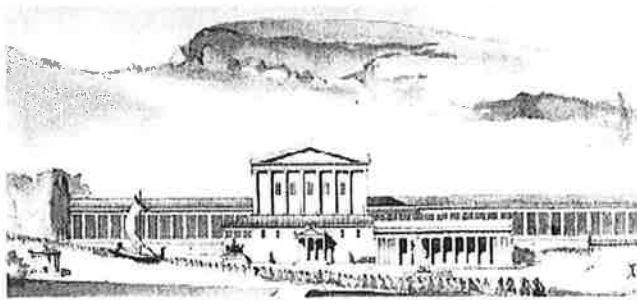


Figure 4: The Panathenaia, restored drawing by J. Travlos, This was them passing through the Athenian Agora

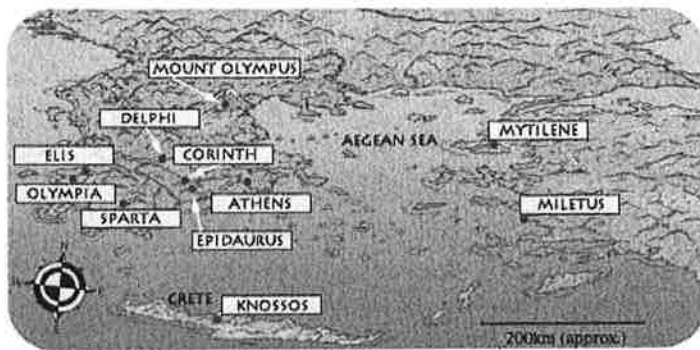


Figure 5 this is a map of Ancient Greece, you can see how close the two worlds were, mortals and immortals. The Greeks probably chose the top of Mount Olympus to be where the Gods lived because it seemed so high up; there was, and still is, a Mountain called Mt. Olympus

There was no barrier between the mortal world and the world of the gods'. Gods took an interest in mortal affairs and controlled all aspects of the natural world i.e. the passage of seasons, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions etc.

Comment [s3]: An example of this would be the Fates, Clotho spins the thread of the mortals lives, Lachesis measures the thread of the mortals lives and Atropos cuts the thread of their story.

Perhaps, it would now be best to take a few myths so we can have a balanced argument on how bad these gods really were.

Athens was a very important place to the Greeks, it was the biggest city in the whole of Greece, rich, fertile, was plentiful in silver, lead and marble, had a very conveniently placed river running through it, it was beautiful, had good trade, was a great place to study, the list is endless. However, would this city be as

great as it was if Athena and Poseidon had not argued over it? They decided to have a competition; whoever could give this place the best gift would be able to name the city. Poseidon struck his trident and a salt water spring formed on the Acropolis; he also said he would help them with trade. Athena planted olive trees which gave the land a source of food and oil. Athena's gift was considered better and Athena named the city Athens after her. If this myth were not true would Athens have been such a great place to live? This story was a statement; Greece which isn't abundant in water was saying just how special these trees were because they were saying the trees were better than water!

I believe to answer my question I will have to say no. Athens made lots of profit on Poseidon's help with trade, as he was the god of sea trade and on the olive trees Athena left them. Athens was built on these two gods.



Figure 6: This is the Acropolis in Athens, the holiest place in Greece.

How could the Ancient Greeks most respected god Zeus be so well thought of when he made the lives of so many mortals so incredibly hard? Zeus was a ladies' man through and through. Interestingly Baldock comments on Zeus' morality ¹, 'The Furies question Zeus' morality... how can he reckon the murder of..... a father to be such a great crime when he was dealt so harshly with his own.' This is a fair point- how the Greeks could expect a loving father when Zeus only knew harshness and abuse from his own, as they say, 'like father, like son.'

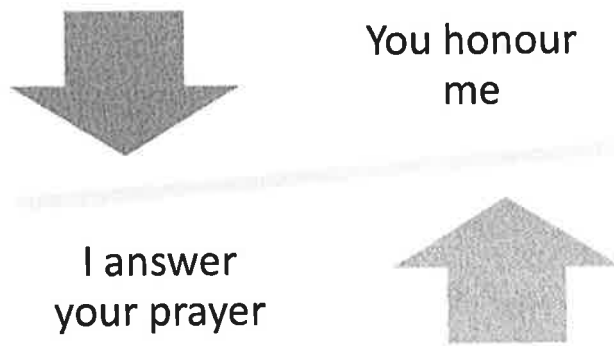
¹ This quote was taken from Greek Tragedy an Introduction - Marion Baldock

Comment [s4]: Athena also invented the double flute. She played it for the gods but Hera and Aphrodite started laughing at her. Afterwards she checked her reflection in a river and she realised that when she played she had to puff her cheeks out and she thought she looked silly. So she threw the lute to Earth in disgust. Marsyas then found the flute... but that is another story.

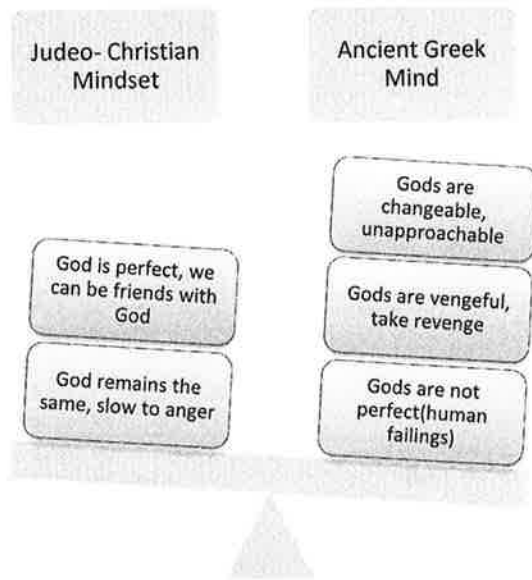


Figure 7: a sketch of Kronus 'eating' Zeus, actually his wife Rhea tricks him, for Zeus was too beautiful for Zeus to eat and she gives him a rock instead. Kronus being foolish believed her.

People prayed to the gods so that they could take vengeance on people they disliked, 'Let there be a path spread with crimson cloth into the house which he did not expect to see..... The gods will arrange what is fated justly.' (Lines 910- 13)This is taken from The Oresteia by Aeschylus. Cassandra says this and hopes her vengeance will be taken on Agamemnon. This is part of the mutual bargain the gods and mortals had. There was no love in their relationship, it was all about obligation. It worked like the diagram below:



Now let's recap and really understand the Greek mind and compare it to our mind:



The end result is the Greek mind is always in turmoil about God and never sure of the outcome, they are burdened which is why their side of the scale is heavier than the Judeo- Christian one. Judeo- Christians know their God loves and cherishes them whereas the Greek had had win favour with their gods. The Greeks are always in a place of uncertainty. The Greek gods were imperfect but the Judeo- Christian God is perfect. However, the Greeks never had to deal with the devil or have the burden of 'why God lets bad things happen to good people'. With this in our in our mind we can weigh the scales and see whether these gods were good or bad.

Here is a chart showing the good and bad things the gods did.

Good things	Bad things
Athena had favoured mortals like Heracles, Perseus, Jason, Odysseus, and she protected them.	Zeus had many affairs with women which resulted in horrible consequences for the women.
Demeter taught King Triptolemus how to plough and sow soil which benefited all the other living mortals as they could eat more things.	The gods led to the start of the 10 year Trojan War by quarrelling about who was the fairest out of Aphrodite, Hera and Athena
Hermes invented the alphabet, astronomy, the lyre, mathematics, gymnastics, boxing and he also was said to have led dead souls into the underworld.	Actaeon accidentally saw Artemis naked and she turned him into a stag then set her hunting hound on him to eat him alive.
Poseidon led lost sailors home, which gave sailors hope that they would arrive home safely as sailing was a dangerous business	Aphrodite loved a young mortal called Adonis, Persephone was jealous and told Ares, Aphrodite's lover, that Aphrodite loved Adonis more than him, so Ares turned himself into a bull and gouged him to death.
Glaucor would warn sailors of dangers on the sea by sending high waves, this informed sailors to cross carefully.	King Agamemnon accidentally killed a sacred deer of Artemis, Artemis stilled the winds so he could not set sail and Artemis demanded that his daughter must be sacrificed to appease her.
Prometheus stole fire from Mount Olympus and gave it to the mortals living below so they could stay warm.	Cassandra offended Apollo so Apollo gave Cassandra the gift of prophecy and he also made it that when she did prophesise no one would listen/ believe her.
Pygmalion worshipped Aphrodite and made a beautiful statue. Aphrodite was pleased	Niobe boasted she was better than Leto as she had 7 sons and 7 daughters while Leto only

Comment [s5]: His daughter was called Iphigenia and Artemis swapped her for a deer and took her away to be her priestess just before King Agamemnon was to kill her.

Comment [s6]: Now we would see this story as highly unfair. Cassandra doesn't want to elope with Apollo so Apollo takes revenge by giving her the unusable talent of prophecy. Now this would be an outrage as men are not allowed to have what they want when they want but in ancient Greece this would have been seen as an insult as being chosen by a god to house their baby was a great honour. It meant divine inspiration and in Cassandra's case if you refused it meant you paid the price.

Comment [s7]: The gods punish human pride

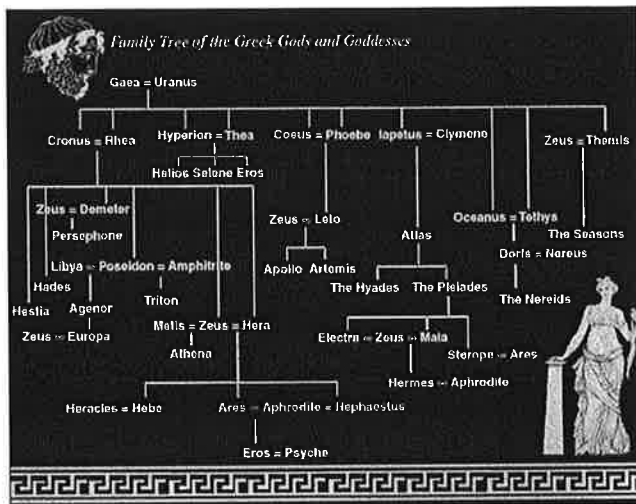
with him because he was a good follower. She rewarded him by bringing the statue to life, he called her Galatea.	had one of each. Apollo and Artemis killed all but 2 of her children. She mourned and was very upset. Zeus then rectified this by turning her into a statue so she could feel no more pain.
The dangerous gorgons were killed by Perseus, Athena helped him by giving him a shield to protect him, Hermes helped by giving him winged sandals so he could fly and Hades helped him by lending him a magic helmet to keep him safe.	Orpheus' wife, Eurydice was taken from life by a snake bite. He was allowed to have her back after many trials if he didn't look back from the way from the underworld if he didn't back. He looked back and Eurydice was taken from him forever. This is a disproportionate punishment for what they did.

This table shows some good and bad things the gods did but does the good outweigh the bad or vice versa? From doing this table I realised how much the gods toyed with people. To quote the Abba song, the Winner Takes it All, 'the God's may throw a dice, their hearts as cold as ice,' this really sums up the behaviour and mindset of the gods. They didn't really care about the people as people, more as objects or as I said before 'pets'. Aeschylus says ²'Our lives are pain, what part nor come from god?' Baldock describes the relationships between mortals and the gods as a bargain. This is an excellent way to describe it. The humans honoured the gods and in return the gods helped them, there was no feeling of love or sentiment just one of business.

One way of looking at the Judeo- Christian view of God is it is like a love story between the people and God but with the Greek gods it's like some perverse theatre with the people as the puppets to be treated however the gods decide. This downplays the dignity of human beings whereas the Judeo- Christian view

² This is taken from his Play Agamemnon in the series the Oresteia, line 1516

says people have ultimate dignity of sons and daughters of God. The Greeks thought that through their suffering, they would learn.



In conclusion, I believe to answer the starting statement we have to view it in two ways. From a Greek mindset we would say the gods were good, they helped them, gave them hope; but surely even to the Greeks some of the things the Gods did to other humans must have seemed a bit shocking and unsettling. If we take a step outside that Greek mindset and do some comparing and contrasting with the Judeo- Christian mindset the answer is clear. Even a superficial glance at the Greek myths we can read the Gods helped with some big issues like the establishing of Athens. However, the action of the gods in individuals' lives caused many problems for those people. This is because of the personality of the Gods, juvenile, vengeful, arrogant, unpredictable and they seemed to take delight in messing with people's lives just because they could. Does this however mean the gods caused more trouble than good into mortals' lives? My answer from a Judeo- Christian mindset is yes they did. However for the Greeks who were used to this treatment the gods were accepted just the way they were. The Greeks knew their gods were imperfect, just like them. They understood their failings and

emotions because they had them themselves, and surely this must have given them some comfort in the harsh world they lived in. So from a Greek mindset, no they weren't bad, in fact without them with war, high infant fatality, death, jealousy, sickness and envy would have eaten them whole. At least they knew they had someone who had been through all that and was watching them. Yes, they knew their gods' spiteful ways but they knew that if they really tried they could win favour with them and spend the rest of their lives in eternity. And, in the words of Aeschylus, 'Παθει Μάθος,' wisdom comes through suffering.

Word Count: 2,539

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Figure 8: The birth of Dionysus

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