

## CHAPTER 2

“ HOMER

# GODS, PRIESTS, AND ORACLES

## GREEK RELIGION

All families have their ups and downs, but one family in particular had more than its share of both. A father who ate his children, siblings who couldn't get along and had to live on opposite ends of the world, husbands and wives who constantly cheated on each other—a nasty bunch.

They did have some good things going for them, though, including eternal life and people so eager to make them happy that they gave them precious objects. Those same people built beautiful temples to the members of this family and made such tall and handsome statues of them that others came from miles around just to see them. A little family discord might seem a small price to pay.

This family was, of course, not a normal one, but the family of the Greek gods, who lived on Mount Olympus (or



*The temple of Poseidon at Cape Sounion has long been a favorite spot for tourists. The English poet Lord Byron visited it in the 1800s and carved his name on a column.*

at least that's what the ancient Greeks believed). They were also perfectly at home on the earth. For the ancient Greeks, the gods were all around, and if you never happened to see one, maybe you would some other day.

The Greek gods were very much like humans in many ways. They ate and drank, they fell in love, they had children, they got into trouble, they had wars—they did everything people did (except die), only on a much larger scale.

So who were they? And where did they come from?

The Greeks thought that once the whole universe was a big swirling nothingness called Chaos. Suddenly a black-winged bird appeared and laid an egg. The egg cracked open, and Eros, the god of love, was born. The top half of the egg flew upward and became Uranus, the sky. The bottom half fell and turned into Gaea, the earth.

Uranus and Gaea fell in love. It's not like they had much choice! There wasn't anyone else there except Eros, and having the god of love flying around might have helped. They had lots of children, called the Titans.

One of their children, Cronos, had a particularly nasty disposition. In fact, he was so worried that one of his children would replace him as the top Titan that as soon as his wife had a baby, he would eat it.

For a while his wife went along with this. But she got sick of seeing her babies disappear into her husband's huge mouth. So when she had her sixth child, a little boy she named Zeus, she wrapped up a stone in baby clothes and gave it to Cronos. He must not have been too bright because he swallowed it and never noticed that it wasn't his son.

After baby Zeus grew up, his father vomited up the other five children: his sons Hades and Poseidon and their sisters Hera, Demeter, and Hestia. It turns out that they were immortal, so instead

*Rhea holds a rock, dressed in baby clothes, out to Cronos, hoping he will be fooled into thinking it is baby Zeus. This krater, or vase, was made in the fifth century BCE.*



### THE 12 GREEK GODS AND THEIR MAIN FUNCTIONS

Zeus	<i>king of the gods and lord of the sky</i>
Hera	<i>queen of the gods</i>
Poseidon	<i>lord of the oceans and earthquakes</i>
Hades	<i>lord of the underworld</i>
Hephaestus	<i>god of metal-working</i>
Aphrodite	<i>goddess of love</i>
Ares	<i>god of war</i>
Athena	<i>goddess of war and wisdom</i>
Apollo	<i>god of the arts and the sun</i>
Artemis	<i>goddess of hunting and the moon</i>
Hermes	<i>messenger of the gods</i>
Dionysus	<i>god of wine</i>

of dying when they were eaten, they had survived. They grew during their wait and emerged as adults. Cronos was so terrified at the sight of his strong children that he ran away.

The six children of Cronos moved to Mount Olympus. In time some of their children joined them, and eventually 12 deities (gods and goddesses) were seated on thrones in the palace on the mountain. Hades and Poseidon didn't get along well with each other or with their brother Zeus, and they spent most of their time in their own faraway kingdoms: Hades ruled the underworld and Poseidon was the lord of the sea.

The gods lived on their mountain, eating a special food called **ambrosia** and drinking nectar. But they also went down to earth from time to time to see what was going on with the humans who worshiped them.

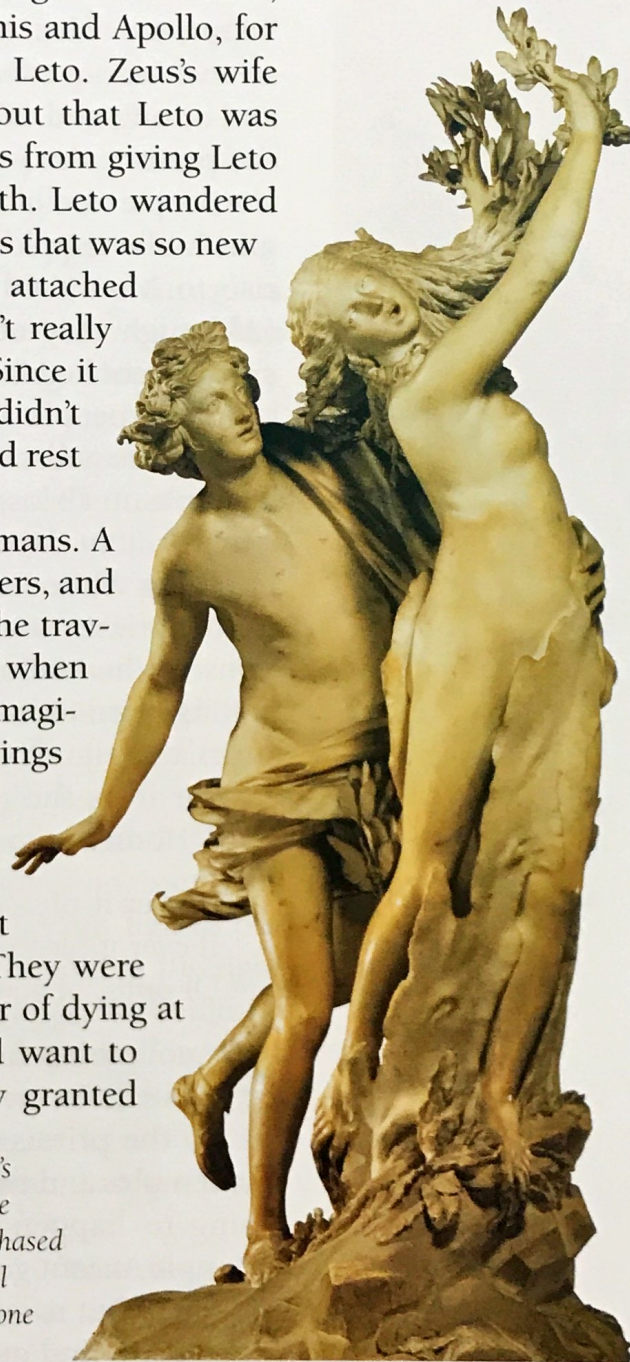
They didn't just watch, however. They got involved with life on earth. They had a tendency to fall in love with humans. This was a problem, because not only did the gods

*a + mbrosis = "not" + "having to do with mortals"*  
 When people say that a food is like ambrosia, they mean it is delicious or "fit for the gods" who were immortal.

live forever, but they never got old, either. So it was sad for them to see the person they were in love with grow wrinkled and sick and eventually die, while they themselves remained as young and beautiful as ever.

Still, that didn't stop them from falling in love. Zeus in particular had many children whose mothers were human. Some of the children of these mixed marriages were mortal, but some became gods. The twins Artemis and Apollo, for example, had a human mother named Leto. Zeus's wife Hera was so furious when she found out that Leto was pregnant that she prohibited all the lands from giving Leto a resting place where she could give birth. Leto wandered until she found a little island named Delos that was so new that it was still floating instead of being attached to the ocean bottom. (New islands don't really float, but the Greeks didn't know that.) Since it wasn't technically part of the land, it didn't have to follow Hera's orders, so Leto could rest there long enough to have her twins.

Sometimes the gods were nice to humans. A kind old couple once took in some travelers, and even though they were poor, they gave the travelers a good dinner. They were astonished when their pitchers and serving dishes kept magically refilling, no matter how many servings were taken from them. It turned out that the two visitors were the gods Hermes and Zeus. They were so pleased at the way the old couple had treated them that they granted the old couple one wish. They were so much in love that they asked the favor of dying at the same time, since neither one would want to live without the other. The gods gladly granted



*The 17th-century Italian artist Gian Lorenzo Bernini's statue Apollo and Daphne tells their story. When the beautiful nymph Daphne ran away from Apollo, he chased after her. She prayed for help and turned into a laurel tree. Apollo was so sad that he adopted the laurel as one of his special symbols.*

### Hymn to Poseidon

Many ancient people thought that earthquakes were caused by the motion of the sea on the earth, or water leaking into cracks in the land. This is why Poseidon, god of the sea, was also god of earthquakes.

*“I begin to sing of the great god Poseidon, mover of the earth and of the barren sea. . . . The gods gave you a double assignment, O Earth-Shaker: to be a tamer of horses and a savior of ships. Hail Poseidon, Holder of the Earth, Dark-haired Lord! O blessed one, be kind in your heart, and helpful to those who make ocean voyages!”*

66 Homer, *Iliad*, about 750 BCE

this request. Years later, when they were too old to go on living, they both turned into trees that grew with their branches intertwined.

So at any time, any passing stranger could be a god. It paid to be nice to people, just in case.

It stood to reason that if the gods were similar to humans, the things that people like would make the gods happy, too. Most people like to be told how great they are, so making up nice songs and poems about how beautiful and strong and wise the gods were would make them like the person who wrote or performed them.

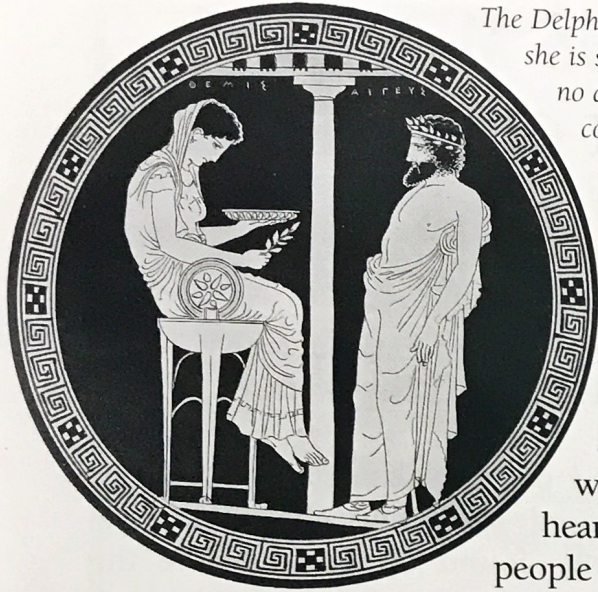
People also like to get presents. So it would help to leave gifts in the temples, and burn meat so that the smoke would rise to Mount Olympus and the gods could feast on it. (Although they ate nothing but ambrosia, they liked the smell of cooked food, and it nourished them.)

Some people served as priests, dedicating their lives to serving the gods, usually choosing one god in particular. In a temple on Delos, the priests made sacrifices to Apollo and Artemis. On Cape Sounion, a cliff overlooking the sea, a gleaming white temple to Poseidon served both as a place for the priests to worship the sea-god and as a kind of lighthouse. When sailors caught sight of it, they knew they were getting close to home and would thank Poseidon for giving them a safe journey. Once, when a priest of Apollo wanted a favor from the god, he reminded Apollo of all his sacrifices. Homer reports the priest's words in the *Iliad*:

If ever it pleased your heart that I built your temple,  
If ever it pleased you that I burnt all the rich thigh pieces  
Of bulls, of goats, then bring to pass this wish I pray for.

Apollo must have felt he owed the priest a favor because he granted the priest's prayer.

So the priests helped the people by being in charge of the temples and the sacrifices. They also predicted what was going to happen. Birds flying in a certain direction, for example, meant good luck. An animal born deformed meant bad luck. But sometimes it was hard to know what the gods wanted. To find out, people turned to the oracles.



*The Delphic sibyl is so absorbed in what she is seeing in her dish that she pays no attention to the king who has come to consult her. She clutches a laurel branch, the symbol of the god Apollo, who was worshiped at Delphi.*

An oracle was a place that had a special connection with a god, and was also the person connected with that place who could hear what the god said. These people were more often called prophets or sibyls. Prophets were often ordinary people, not priests. Sometimes they thought they could hear what a god said and reported it to the people, but more often, they went into a kind of trance and start talking in the voice of the god. When they came out of the trance, they often had no idea of what they had been saying and had to ask the people around them what the god wanted. Oracles were just like stereo speakers; they had no control over what sound went through them.

Sometimes it was hard to understand what the oracle was saying. The oracle at Cumae, in a part of Italy settled by Greeks, wrote her prophecies on leaves. She lived in a room at the end of a long tunnel carved into the side of a hill. When a person seeking an answer opened the door to her room, the wind made the leaves swirl around. The person had to put the leaves back together and hope they got them in the right order. Other times, an oracle said something that could be interpreted in different ways. One told a king that if he went to battle, there would be a great victory. Later, when the defeated monarch returned to remind her of what she had predicted, the oracle said, "There was a great victory—it just didn't happen to be yours!"

So dealing with the gods was sometimes frustrating. But the Greeks expected this. Life is often unfair, and the gods were part of life.

### THE DELPHIC SIBYL

The most famous Greek oracle was in Delphi. After a ritual of chewing laurel leaves, bathing, and other activities, the prophet sat on a special three-legged stool. After a while she appeared to go into a trance, and then started talking, often making little or no sense. A priest had to tell people what she meant.

In 2002, a team of scientists discovered a rock under the floor of the temple of Apollo at Delphi that when rubbed produces sweet gas. Small amounts of it can make people feel separated from the real world. There are frequently small earthquakes in Greece, which might have produced enough of this gas to make the oracle feel she was channeling the god.