



## **Why Did the Ancient Greeks Have a Love-Hate Relationship with their Myths?**

**A lecture by Dr Christopher Gribbin**

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Myth was ever-present in ancient Greek society and very important to many ancient Greeks. Myth fulfilled a number of important functions. As in many societies, myths provided explanations for the way things are, described the nature of the world, provided an account of the Greeks' history and served as entertainment. Myth was particularly important to the Greeks as a source of inspiration, telling them of a time when their ancestors had done great things. Myth was also a way that cultural wisdom was preserved and passed from one generation to the next.

Yet some ancient Greek thinkers complained about their myths – not because these thinkers rejected Greek religion or Greek myth, but because they found the particulars of Greek myths distasteful. For example:

“Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods everything that is a shame and a reproach among mortals: stealing, committing adultery and deceiving each other.” (Xenophanes fr. B11)

“the calumnies of the poets, who declare that the offspring of the immortals have perpetrated as well as suffered things more atrocious than any perpetrated or suffered by the offspring of the most impious of mortals; aye, the poets have related about the gods themselves tales more outrageous than anyone would dare tell concerning their enemies. For not only have they imputed to them thefts and adulteries, and vassalage among men, but they have fabricated tales of the eating of children, the castrations of fathers, the fettering of mothers, and many other crimes.” (Isocrates, *Busiris* 38)

“the story of what Cronos did, and what he suffered at the hands of his son, is not fit to be repeated to the young and foolish, even if it were true ... a young audience [should not] be told that anyone who commits horrible crimes, or punishes his father unmercifully, is doing nothing out of the ordinary but merely following what the first and greatest of the gods have done before.” (Plato, *Republic* II:378a-b)

Two main factors brought this love-hate relationship about. Firstly, there's a tension built into Greek religion with respect to morality. Morality is not a core element of Greek religion – from that perspective, there's no reason to expect the gods to be moral. But morality does feature in Greek religion in secondary ways and at a high-level – from that perspective, one can expect the gods to be moral. Secondly, many Greek myths come from a much earlier time than the people complaining about the myths, and reflect a different sort of society, with different customs and values.

In response to this situation, some Greek complained about their myths and some satirised them. Some Greeks created new myths and/or new gods. Some Greeks re-interpreted their myths to remove the gods from the stories or to see the stories as allegories for morally neutral acts.

### **Further reading**

Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths?*

G.S. Kirk, *The Nature of Greek Myths*

Jan N. Bremmer, *Greek Religion*

Simon Price, *Religions of the Ancient Greeks*