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GOD IN HUMAN FORM: AN EXAMINATION OF ANTHROPOMORPHISM IN GREEK COSMOGONY

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Abstract

Anthropomorphism is a popular concept in most religions of the world. It endears a worshipper more to an object of worship; and so, both form a mutual divine relationship. In Greek literature and mythology, divine beings are depicted as beings who did not only exhibit human traits but also live amongst mortals. For instance, Zeus, in Greek mythology, is portrayed as an amorous god who mates with numerous goddesses and mortals. In modern religions like Christianity, one finds the concept of anthropomorphism vividly portrayed. For instance, Jesus Christ was portrayed as both God and man in the Bible; or to put it rather succinctly, God in human form.

Realizing the complexities of mythological deities, this paper examines the anthropomorphic character of Zeus, the king of the Olympian deities and posits that the concept of anthropomorphism is central to the Greek religion. The paper draws its evidence of the anthropomorphic traits of Zeus from the works of Hesiod and Homer.

Keywords: Anthropomorphism, Zeus, Greek mythology, Homer, Hesiod.

Introduction

Greek religion belongs to the class of ancient polytheism. The gods of such polytheism have each a defined sphere of influence. Hesiod's *Theogony* illustrates this by giving an account of the origin and activities of the Greek gods and goddesses that made up the pantheon.² According to Hesiod, the Greek created in their children the various assistance and help which a god can offer them in times of need. The Greek gods have well-known qualities and they are ever available to their worshippers. A balanced worshipper does not select or choose between the set of Greek gods but pays some respect to them all. To neglect one god is to reject an area of human experience (Onayemi, 2010). Similarly, individual Greek communities paid special honour to particular gods, but not to the exclusion of the other. For example, Athena was the divine Patroness of Athens, and Hera that of Samos. The Athenian decree of 405 BC, which celebrated Athenian-Samian co-operation which was depicted in a vase painting showed the two goddesses clasping hands. However, Hera was also an honoured goddess in Athens and *vice-versa* (Onayemi, 2010).

The number of principal gods was always quite restricted. Homer, for instance, shows ten important gods in action (Zeus, Hera, Athena, Apollo, Artemis, Poseidon, Aphrodite, Hermes, Hephaestus, and Ares) and these, together with Demeter and Dionysus, made up the twelve Olympians, the conventional total recognized from the fifth century onwards (Burket,2000). Alongside these gods and goddesses were the Nymphs, just as important in cults as the junior partners among the twelve, Hephaestus and Ares.

Most of them could be conceived as living in Zeus' palace on the heavenly mountain Olympus. They were called the Olympians. Onayemi opines that Homer seems to take for granted that the Greek pantheon exhibit human traits. According to her:

Homer takes for granted that his gods on Olympus are very human. Although they are stronger, yet they are no better than mortal men-capricious, jealous of their right, and not much interested in morality (Onayemi, 2010: 3).

The ancient Greeks have an endless inventory of deities offering them various services, which are paid for at each shrine by certain prayers and

sacrifices. Each god was actually responsible for many different areas of life and was given an adjective, known as an epithet which sometimes indicates the power in virtues of which a worshipper was appealing to the god. For instance, the epithet Zeus 'the general' evidently did not have in his gift the same benefits as 'Zeus of property'. Sometimes it seems that the epithet's main function was merely to introduce local discriminations within the pantheon common to all Greece. Villagers no doubt took pleasure in knowing that their Zeus or Athena was not quite the same as the one worshipped in next village over the hill (Burket, 2000).

To understand the place of religion in Greek society, we must move away from the central religious institutions of modern days. This is because religious matters in ancient Greece lay in the hands of those who have secular powers; in the household, with the father, in early communities with the king, in developed city-states with the magistrate or even with the citizens' assembly (Renshaw, 2000).

There was, therefore, no religious organization that could spread moral teaching, develop doctrine, or impose an orthodoxy. In such a context a Creed would have been unthinkable. In a famous passage, Herodotus named two poets as the theologians of Greece.

Not till the day before yesterday, so to speak, did the Greeks know the origin of each of the gods, or whether they all existed always, and what they were like in appearance. It Homer and Hesiod who created a theogony for the Greeks, gave the gods their epithets, divided out offices and functions among them, and described their appearances (Herodotus 2.53).

It is, no doubt, true that prestige of Homer's and Hesiod's poetry did much to stabilize the Greeks' conceptions of their gods. However, everyone knew that the Muses who inspired epic poets told lies as well as truth, and in many details of divine genealogy there are contradictions. Nevertheless, Homer's and Hesiod's accounts explain clearly the anthropomorphic traits of these gods and goddess. As Xenophanes of Colophon in his book, *Fragment II*, explains:

Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods all things that bring rebuke and blame among which are - stealing, adultery and deceit (Xenophanes, Fragment II).

The Greek revered their gods and goddesses by honouring them with gifts, animals, libations and prayers on a regular basis. They recognized that the gods were far more powerful and so they ought to show them respect and adoration. Hesiod explains this thus:

Satisfy the immortal gods with libations and sacrifice, when you go to bed and when the pleasant light returns, so that they may have a kindly heart and spirit towards you, and you may buy other people's land and not have someone else buy yours (Hesiod, Works And Days. Lines 338-41).

The above excerpt shows the enormous reverence Greek worshippers give to the gods. With the hope that their gods would help them in every aspect of their lives, sacrifices were offered to the gods. These offerings often took place at the temple which was built to honour the gods. Often times, the Greeks believed that once proper sacrifices, offering and appeasement were made to the gods, the gods on their part would be on their side in their various endeavours. Xenophones put this succinctly when he said:

The gods are obviously now our allies. In clear weather, they create a storm when it is to our advantage, and now the gods have brought us to a place where the enemy cannot throw their spears and javelins over the head of the front ranks because their spears and javelins must fly uphill, but we, throwing our spears, javelins and rocks downhill, will reach them and around marry (Xenophone, Hellenika 2.4).

As it has been mentioned above, divinities were easily recognized by their religious importance or their social functions (Burket, 2000). Each god was actually responsible for many different areas of life. However, the Greeks believed that their gods were both immortal and ageless, and that they could exhibit human traits. For instance, Zeus, the king of the gods, was always portrayed as having a fatherly figure in his middle-age; while Apollo was portrayed as a god with a youthful manhood (Burket, 2000).

At the top of hierarchical order of gods is Zeus himself, the king, the father of both gods and mortal, the supreme Lord. Zeus is also the god who upholds the highest moral values in the order to the universe. He is the god who protects the family, the clan, and the state, championing the universal

moral and ethical responsibilities that these human associations entail (Burket, 2000).

Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is the interpretation of non- human things or events in the terms of human characteristics. It is derived from the Greek word *Anthropos* (human) and *Morphic* (Form). The term was first used to refer to the attribution of human, physical or mental features of the Olympian deities. In Greek religion and mythology, anthropomorphism is the belief that the gods are deified human beings. It is the perception of a divine being or beings in human form or the recognition of human qualities in those beings (Burket, 2000).

In a distinctive analysis, Greek myth portrays as resembling supremely privileged human beings only incomparably stronger, more beautiful and more powerful, blessedly immuned to sickness, old age or death. Ancient mythologies frequently represented them with human forms and qualities to explain natural phenomena, creation and historical events. Deities fell in love, married, had children, fought battles, wielded weapons and rode horses and chariots. When not engaged in manipulating human beings for their own purposes, the Olympians, as they were called, frequently gathered at heavenly banquet while they dined on Ambrosia and drank nectar, foods that sustain their perpetual youthfulness (Burket, 2000).

Anthropomorphic deities represented specific human concepts such as love, war, fertility, beauty or the seasons. They exhibit human qualities like beauty, wisdom and power. They also betray character flaws typical of ordinary mortal engaging in conspiracies and competitions for power and prestige as well as sexual adventures of every description. They exhibited human weakness such as jealousy, greed hatred and uncontrollable anger (Burket, 2000). The Greek gods and goddesses showed these human characteristics and these raise the question as to whether they are humans or not. In order to shed more light on the anthropomorphic traits of the Greek gods, Zeus, who is the king of the Olympian gods, is examined.

The Anthropomorphic Traits of the Olympian Deities

To examine the anthropomorphic characteristics of the Olympian gods and goddesses, we shall take Zeus as our focus. This is unconnected with the position of Zeus as the king and father of the Olympian deities but rather

because Zeus seems to exhibit more human traits than any of the Olympian deities. The conception of Zeus as the father and almighty, for instance is evident in many classical authors. Hesiod, for instance, in the opening section of his book, *Works and Days*, warns of the terror of Zeus is punishment of the wicked:

Though Zeus, who dwells in a most lofty home and thunders from a high and by mighty will, mortals are both known and unknowns, renowned and unrenowned; for easily he makes them strong and easily he brings them low; easily he makes the overweening humble and champions the obscure; easily he makes the crooked straight and strikes down the haughty (Hesiod, *Works and Days*, Lines 1-7).

The etymological root of Zeus' name means 'bright'. His attributes are thunder and lightning, and he is often depicted as a man in his prime, usually bearded. Many epithets described Zeus as the chief of the gods. The epithet sometimes indicates the power in virtue of which worshipper was appealing to the god: Zeus 'the general' evidently did not have in his gift the same benefits as 'Zeus of property'. Most of these epithets merely introduce local discriminations within the Pantheon common to all Greece (Guthrie, 1977). The most common of these epithets was Zeus 'the cloud-gather'.

The fatherly role of Zeus is widespread in Homer. However, it is Hesiod again in his *Theogony*, that presents an explicit account of Zeus' role as a father and a husband:

Now king of gods, Zeus made Metis his first wife, wiser than any other god, or any mortal man. But when she was about to deliver the owl-eyed goddess Athena, Zeus tricked her, gulled her with crafty words, and stuffed her in his stomach, taking the advice of Earth and Starry Heaven....

Next he (Zeus) married gleaming Themis, who bore the seasons and Eunomia, Jike, and blooming Eirene, who attended men's works for them, and the Moriai, whom wise Zeus gave honor supreme. Klotho, Lakheis, and Atropos, who assign to mortal men the good and evil they have.

...last of all Zeus made Hera his blossoming wife and she gave birth to Hebe, Eilethya, and Ares, after mingling in love with the Lord of gods and men (Hesiod, *Theogony*, Lines 891-911,

926-928).

Zeus had married two goddesses, Metis and Themis, and begotten children from then before he finally settled down with his sister, Hera. Their union represents yet another enactment of the sacred marriage between the sky-god and earth-goddess. This is made clear in Homer's *Iliad*, who describes their love making:

The Son of Cronus clasped his wife in his arms and under them the divine earth sprouted forth new grass, dewy clover, crocuses, and hyacinths, thick and soft, to protect them from the ground beneath. On this they lay together and drew around themselves a beautiful golden cloud from which the glistening drops fell away (Homer, *Iliad*, Lines 346-351).

Zeus presides over all the rules and regulations guiding the Olympian family just as we have the case of the Greeks visualizing the gods in their own idealized image and ascribed them to the basic needs of their own social structure. Relating this to Greek family, it is also a socio-political arrangement whereby male leadership and values dominate and women and children were subjected to patriarchal control.

Zeus' role as a husband is further explained in relation to his wife, Hera. Was Zeus a faithful husband? To answer this question, we need to understand the patriarchal nature of ancient Greek society or any other society in antiquity. The Greek attitude towards women was carefully summed up in the words of Demonthenes, a Greek General and Statesman:

Hetairai we have for the sake of pleasure... but wives to bear us legitimate children and to look after the house faithfully (Demontheses, *Against Neara* 12).

Although these words show the feelings of most Greek men towards their concubine, it is important to note that this concept was borrowed from the Olympian deities, this patriarchal feeling, according to Thucydides, a Greek historian, was also buttressed by Pericles, a Greek democrat thus:

The greatest glory of a woman is to be least talked about among men, whether in praise or blame (cited in Renshaw, 2012).

Hera was constantly depicted as a nagging wife who will punish and avenge the romantic escapades of her husband. The reason for this is not far-fetched; Zeus is variously portrayed as an unfaithful husband and more than once he faced the shrewish harangues of his wife and at least indirectly through pain and suffering wrought by his promiscuity.

Hera appears in mythological stories as jealous, violent and vindictive, often angry with Zeus, whose amorous relationships with both goddesses and mortals she regarded as an insult. Nevertheless, Hera's anger and her vengeful actions sometimes had other reasons behind them. According to Homer cited by Pierre:

Hera and Zeus were arguing one day as to whether the man or the woman derived greater pleasure from sex. Zeus said that women enjoyed it more, Hera that men did. The two deities consulted Tiresias, who had experienced sex both as a man and as a woman. Tiresias said that if the pleasure of love were divided into ten parts, the man felt one of those parts, while the woman felt the other nine. Hera was so annoyed that she deprived Tiresias of his sight (Pierre,1985).

Despite the above, Zeus is a loving father and often times he intervened in quarrels between the gods and goddesses and between mortals even. For instance, he intervened in the quarrel between Apollo and Heracles concerning the tripod of Delphi; between Athena and Poseidon who were fighting over the possession of Attica; between Aphrodite and Persephone over Adonis also intervened in the labour of Heracles, giving him weapons against his enemies or removing him from their hands when he is injured.

Various evidences that show that Zeus as a loving and caring father is depicted by Homer in the *Iliad* when Aphrodite wounded by Diomedes in battle: Battle is not your gift, my child. You should busy yourself with the Work of desire and love: leave all this business to swift Ares and Athena (Homer, *Iliad* 5.428-430).

Diomedes, a mortal, also wounded the god of war himself, Ares in battle. But Ares complaint got little sympathy from Zeus:

Do not sit beside me and complain you two- faced rogue. Of all the gods who dwell on Olympus you are the most hateful to me, for strife and wars and battles are always clear to you... still I shall not endure any longer that you be in pain, for you are

f my blood and your mother bore you to me. But if you were born some other of the gods, since you are so destructive you would have long since been thrown out from Olympus (Homer, Iliad 5. 887-891, 895-898).

These lines Portray Zeus as a father who shows favouritism among his children; for he shows sympathy and love for Aphrodite but anger and condemnation for Ares.

Apart from being a father and husband, Zeus is also a lover. His intrigues with mortals were countless. Little wonder there was hardly any region in the Greek world which did not boast of an eponymous hero who was a son born of one of Zeus' love affairs. Similarly, most of the great families of legend were connected with Zeus. For example, the Heraclids were descended not only from the union of the god and Alcmene but also, earlier, from the union of Zeus and Danae. Achilles and Ajax were also descended from Zeus through the Nymph. More also, the ancestor of Agamemon and his brother Menelaus, Tantalus, was said to be the son of Zeus and Pluto. The race of Cadmus was connected with Zeus through Io and her Epaphus: Finally, the Lacedaemonians claimed descent from the god and the Nymph Taygete (Pierre, 1985: 457).

Zeus' untamed sexual appetite drives him to have children by both human and divine (mothers). Hera's consequent jealousy adds to the family stress. However, it was the union between Zeus and Io that vividly depicted Zeus as an unfaithful husband and a randy lover. The story goes thus: Io was loved by Zeus. She was a priestess of Hera and could not avoid detection by the goddess. Zeus failed to deceive Hera, who in retaliation turned Io into a white cow. And to guard her new possession, she set Argus over her. Argus, whose parentage is variously given, had many eyes and because his eyes never slept at once at once, he could have Io under constant surveillance. Zeus therefore sent Hermes to rescue Io; Hermes lured Argus to sleep by telling him stories, and then cut off his head. Despite this, Io still could not escape Hera's jealousy. Hera sent a gadfly that so maddened her that she wandered miserably over the whole world until finally she came to Egypt. Then by the Nile, Zeus restored her human form, and she gave birth to a son, Epaphus (Pierre,1985).

However, many of these unions took place with Zeus disguised as an animal or in some other form. For instance, he transformed to a bull in his

union with Europa; with Leda a swan; with Dana a shower of gold. These adventures often exposed Zeus to Hera's anger. One explanation given by ancient writers for Zeus metamorphoses was the desire to be concealed from his wife.

Conclusion

This paper has re-examined the popular anthropomorphic conception of Zeus as the father, husband, and lover; and it has illustrated, too, the primary sphere of his power: the sky and the upper air, with their thunder, lightning and rain. The paper also examined the human side of these gods and goddesses and shows that the only difference between these gods and men is in the gods' supernatural powers. As has been explained above, the concept of anthropomorphism is peculiar to all religion. However, its full expression is found in Greek polytheism in which an average Greek thought of his god in his own image. This is necessary because the Greeks believe that if their gods were to remain gods it is essential that the gods sympathize with human feelings and emotions.

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