

## COMMENTATIONES AD LITTERAS GRAECAS PERTINENTES

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### BEYOND MYTH: IN SEARCH OF ARCHAIC GREEK THEOLOGY

ABSTRACT. Jarczyk Magdalena, *Beyond Myth: in Search of Archaic Greek Theology*.

The author examines several passages from Homer, Hesiod and the *Hymns* for content appropriate for religious instruction, a function both traditionally attributed to those works (by Herodotus) and denied them (at the earliest, by Xenophanes). The issues cover theodicy, the nature of deities and their *honours*, the efficacy of prayer and the meaning of sacrifices and food offerings.

Key words: Homer, Hesiod, hymns, archaic theology.

What did the Greeks believe about their gods? The relationship between religious belief and practice has not remained constant in history and there is no denying that faith, or even belief, was of much less importance in an ancient polytheism such as that of the Greeks than it has been in Christianity. At the same time, a measure of belief, conceptualized as knowledge rather than faith, was necessary for cult purposes.

Let us consider the Archaic Period of Greek history and literature. The paper attempts to answer two questions: how did the young people of those times, or anybody else for that matter, learn their religion? And two, what was it they learned? Quite likely much of the process did without literature, consisting in instruction received directly from one's elders, the peer group and the local community as a whole, and in imitation and participation. That part, never written down, is as good as lost to us today. But then we have Herodotus' evidence,<sup>1</sup> to paraphrase, that everything the Greeks knew

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<sup>1</sup> 2.53: "But whence each of the gods came to be, or whether all had always been, and how they appeared in form, [the Greeks] did not know until yesterday or the day before, so to speak; for I suppose Hesiod and Homer flourished not more than four hundred years earlier

about the gods, they had learned from Homer and Hesiod, and so we must not ignore the role of poetry in religious instruction. And in addition to Homer and Hesiod proper, our corpus should include other texts attributed to them in antiquity, especially the *Homeric Hymns*. In selecting passages and themes, I have concentrated not on religious practice as such, but on collective conceptual structures informing it, i.e. on whatever content can be found in those works that can provide a mental framework for cult. Such a framework can be called *ideology*, as in Critical Discourse Analysis;<sup>2</sup> here I have labelled it theology, somewhat loosely in that it may have things to say about humanity as well as the gods.

Before I present a few examples of what I think are pieces of this natural theology, I must make explicit my criteria for selecting them. The works in question would be denounced, a few centuries later, as impious and especially as bad for education. Plato, who is the main source of this criticism, objected to passages representing gods as cruel, vengeful, petty or dishonest, although he apparently thought it was possible to select appropriately reverent passages for use at school.<sup>3</sup> Already Xenophanes<sup>4</sup> thought it preposterous that the gods should have human form, and with it all the human vices, and he, too, mentioned Homer and Hesiod by name, the same poets Herodotus so unquestioningly listed as the teachers of Hellas in matters of religion. We are presented with an incongruity then, with thoroughly ambivalent attitudes, not that difficult for us today to recapture, especially as we read works such as the larger *Homeric Hymn to Hermes* (*H. Hom. 4*), with its burlesque and even obscenity. Yet it has been shown to be a profoundly didactic and pedagogical poem,<sup>5</sup> and was probably in use in schools in early

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than I; and these are the ones who taught the Greeks the descent of the gods, and gave the gods their names, and determined their spheres and functions, and described their outward forms." (transl. A. Godley).

<sup>2</sup> E. g. to G. Kress and R. Hodge (*Language as Ideology*, Routledge and Kegan Paul 1979, p. 6) ideology is "a systematic body of ideas organized from a particular point of view. Ideology is thus a subsuming category which includes sciences and metaphysics as well as political ideologies of various kinds, without implying anything about their status and reliability as guides to reality."

<sup>3</sup> *Rep.* 2.377b: "We must begin, then, it seems, by a censorship over our storymakers, and what they do well we must pass and what not, reject..." Or 2.378d: "But Hera's fettering by her son and the hurling out of heaven of Hephaestus by his father when he was trying to save his mother from a beating, and the battles of the gods in Homer's verse (θεομαχίας ὄσας Ὅμηρος πεποίηκεν) are things that we must not admit into our city..." (transl. P. Shorey) Other relevant places would be *Rep.* 3.391, 3.408d, 10.596, 10.600a, 10.605b, 10.606e; *Eutyphr.* 6 and 8; and *Leg.* 10.886c, 10.890a, 12.941b.

<sup>4</sup> Fr. 10 and 13.

<sup>5</sup> Before, that is, one even considers it as instructive of religion. See S. Iles Johnston, *Myth, festival and poet: The "Homeric Hymn to Hermes" and its performative context*, "Classical Philology" XCVII, 2002, p. 109-132, and M. Jarczyk, *Książę złodzię wychowawcą młodzieży. Hermes*

Classical times.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, we can be pretty sure now that the *Homeric Hymns* were used in cult to invoke their gods, which makes them cletic pieces if only implicitly so.<sup>7</sup> It is difficult to be certain, but I suppose the ancient listeners experienced some of this ambivalence too, although perhaps less than people of later times, since they lived with a stronger memory of the days in which these now problematic notions were not yet anachronistic. The *Hymns* have also been explicitly called theological.<sup>8</sup>

The tenor of cult was in fact very different and not at all light-hearted, as could be shown by an analysis of the semantics in archaic poetry of ἱερός (*sacred*) and θάμβος (*awe*). An attitude to the divine seems to emerge for which *awe* is perhaps, in fact, the best word; an attitude not of love and not of simple fear either, but rather of something like breathless shock of fear and joy combined. A reverent attitude anyway, with which much of our literary mythical material is apparently in conflict. We should narrow the search down, then, to passages and themes which could help inspire θάμβος, and which could be taken as instructive.

Two remarks before I proceed to the illustrations. There seems to be room for terror in awe as I have just outlined it, which helps understand the didactic and cultic functions of the more grisly tales, such as that in which Cronos devours his children. What, then, of all the light-hearted material, funny and often indecent? I think its function can again be best seen in the *Homeric Hymns*, since they were actually performed for the gods as part of the ritual. To put it simply, awe is exhausting, making comic relief all the more welcome. We must imagine that worshippers ritually smiled at their gods in the same spirit in which they engaged in aischrology, to vent the enormous tension and lighten a mood that was becoming oppressive. There is even a hint at aischrology in the *Hymn to Demeter* (*H. Hom.* 2), in the character of Iambe.

Pure awe seems to me rare in the early epic outside Hesiod and ambiguous in lyric. Instead, the poets speak light-heartedly of the gods, in the

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w IV hymnie homeryckim, [in:] *Formy organizacji życia społecznego w starożytności*, Poznań 2006, p. 21-31.

<sup>6</sup> T. B. L. Webster, *Homeric Hymns and Society*, [in:] *Le monde grec. Pensée, littérature, histoire, documents. Hommage à C. Préaux*, éd. par J. Bingen, G. Lambier, G. Nachtergaele, 1975, p. 86. The authors identify the lekythos painting as one of a boy reading *H. Hom.* 18, but that poem, as we have it, consists only of the initial and final lines of *H. Hom.* 4, the only differing line being (1), which could easily have been variable in any case.

<sup>7</sup> J. F. García, *Symbolic action in the "Homeric Hymns": the theme of recognition*, "Classical Antiquity" XXI, 2002, p. 5-39.

<sup>8</sup> E. g. by J. Strauss-Clay, *The Politics of Olympus. Form and Meaning in the Major "Homeric Hymns"*, Princeton UP, Princeton: 7, and the *Hymn to Hermes* specifically by W. Lengauer, *Religijność starożytnych Greków*, Warszawa 1994, p. 19.

spirit neither of worshipful respect nor of ridicule, but rather of sympathetic amusement at the antics of the immortals. This would apparently further a sober, critical approach to one's religious tradition, and so we should not be surprised when we find exactly this attitude in Plato and other writers both before and after him. But the fact remains that the man in the street continued for generations to worship the gods in the old way. Religious practice was very much alive among those people who learned their religion, to a large extent, from seemingly frivolous poetry. And so there must have been more to it than entertainment, some content that could genuinely inspire acts of worship. As indicated above, it has been suggested that to the extent it can be propositionally expressed, we call such content theology.

My purpose here is to distinguish, not between myth and theology, but rather between the entertaining and the theological in myth, understood in its literary form; and below, to illustrate such theological material as attested in a number of works of archaic Greek poetry. The emerging theological structures should contribute to our understanding of Greek religion in its conceptual dimension.

My first example of theological content comes from the *Odyssey*. One crucial aspect of the human-divine relationship on which this epic sheds light, one fundamental to religion, is the problem of fate versus free will, or of explaining suffering and evil. (Most of the analysis to follow I owe to Odysseus Tsagarakis, who also gives it in much more detail.<sup>9</sup>) It is wrong, the poet seems to teach, to blame all one's suffering on the gods, either in the straightforward way or by explaining it as punishment for fated, unavoidable evil. But when Zeus protests against that unpleasant human custom, he does not go so far as to suggest the gods have nothing to do with the pains of mankind. No, they still punish transgressions, they are still dispensers of suffering; and mortals are still bound by fate in this poem, only now fate is seen more to consist in the constraints of their own characters. Some people may be beyond redemption, so to speak, but most deserve to be tested, or tried. The trial takes the form of a warning (which Aegisthus receives from Hermes, and the suitors, Odysseus, his companions, and perhaps Polyphemus too, from seers), followed by adverse circumstances and a temptation, or a challenge of their principles. The adversities did come from the gods but were not in this case punishment, only hurdles designed to discover a person's mettle. The greatest winner of these god-sent contests was of course Odysseus himself, but I would also include Penelope and Telemachus. They were all tested for resourcefulness and patience, but also

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<sup>9</sup> O. Tsagarakis, *Studies in "Odyssey"* 11 (Hermes Einzelschriften 82), Franz Steiner Verlag 2000, p. 45-69.

piety and trust in the gods: unlike his hubristic companions, the hungry Odysseus prayed for help on Thrinacia, as did his wife and son in their respective straits, in sharp contrast with the merrymaking suitors.<sup>10</sup> In this way, by heeding the warning and refusing to transgress when all circumstances encouraged it, by responding to the divine challenge to excel, a human being could influence their fate, shape their moira. I believe the underlying image to be one of games, surprisingly foreshadowing a similar ethical idea in stoicism.<sup>11</sup>

If Homer and Hesiod unified Greek religion by creating a common pan-Hellenic reference point, the *Hymns* served the same purpose, only more consciously. Of the four long ones we have today, two showed young male gods claiming their share of honour in the Olympian order, which was apparently just emerging, while in the other two, great goddesses were presented diminished in power and honour and subjected to the rule of Zeus. Jenny Strauss-Clay has shown<sup>12</sup> that the key to understanding these four poems as a corpus lies in the word I have just rendered *honour*, in τιμή. The gods desire it and compete for it; without it, they are nothing, like Homer's heroes. But the ultimate dispenser of τιμή is Zeus, as Hesiod reminds us in the *Theogony*,<sup>13</sup> neatly summarizing the basic concept behind the four *Hymns*, which all speak of the pantheon as a structure united under Zeus' leadership and motivated by an economy, or politics, based on τιμή. They also contain hints of a previous mythical order, centred more on goddesses,

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<sup>10</sup> *Od.* 1.32–34: “My, how those mortals blame the gods; for they say it is from us that evils come, whereas they **also** suffer beyond measure **of themselves** (οἱ δὲ καὶ αὐτοὶ σφῆσιν ἀτασθαλίησιν ὑπὲρ μόνον ἄλγε' ἔχουσιν), through their own blind folly.” (Zeus speaking). 1.6–7: “But even so he did not save his companions, although he wanted to; for, stupid, they perished **through their own** blind folly...” (or “determined recklessness”; ἀτασθαλίη is almost the same as ὕβρις). 3.205–207: “Would that the gods would give me such strength, to punish for their transgression the suitors, who commit outrageous injustice (ὕβριζοντες, ἀτάσθαλα) against me” (Telemachus). 8.166: “Stranger, you said an ugly thing, like a shameless man” (ἀτασθάλω ἀνδρὶ ξοικας, Odysseus to Euryalus, who later apologizes). 12.300–301: “let no one through ugly blind folly kill either a cow or a sheep” (on Thrinacia). But 4.693: “but he never ever worked injustice (ἀτάσθαλον) against another man” (Penelope about Odysseus; my translation).

<sup>11</sup> Epict. 1.24.1; Sen., *De Providentia* 2.5–12; cf. J. Griffin, *The Divine Audience and the Religion of the Iliad*, [in:] *Homer: Critical Assessments*, ed. I. J. F. de Jong, vol. III, Routledge 1999, p. 459.

<sup>12</sup> J. Strauss-Clay, *op. cit.*, *passim*, but especially 7–15, 155 fn. and 268–270. Also J.S. Clay, *The Homeric Hymns*, [in:] *A New Companion to Homer*, ed. I. Morris and B. Powell, Brill 1997, p. 499–500.

<sup>13</sup> *Th.* 881–885: “But when the blessed gods had finished their toil, and settled by force their struggle for **honors** (τιμῶν) with the Titans, they pressed far-seeing Olympian Zeus to reign and to rule over them, by Earth's prompting. So he divided their **dignities** (τιμὰς) amongst them.” (transl. H.G. Evelyn-White).

not only in the stories of Demeter and Aphrodite, but also in Hera's Typhonic plot against Zeus' autocratic rule.<sup>14</sup>

But it is important to see what the τιμαὶ are. As in Homer,<sup>15</sup> they imply respect and riches (which are among young Hermes' concerns, for example<sup>16</sup>). But if Achilles and Odysseus receive τιμὴ in return for defending their communities, that is for something they do, the τιμαὶ of the gods **are** what they do, they are their cult functions, or the things about which people address them in prayer. The *Hymns*, then, are not only detailed depictions of the several gods; they also explain what can motivate a god in his actions and how the pantheon functions in terms of relationships of power, respect, reciprocity, family, friendship and rivalry.

Also from Jenny Strauss-Clay<sup>17</sup> I have taken an analysis of the passage in the *Theogony* sometimes called the *Hymn to Hecate*.<sup>18</sup> Its position in the

<sup>14</sup> *H. Hom.* 3.305–370.

<sup>15</sup> Where they determine a hero's status; see A. Adkins, *Homeric Ethics*, [in:] *A New Companion to Homer*, ed. I. Morris and B. Powell, Brill 1997, p. 702-704.

<sup>16</sup> *H. Hom.* 4.163–175: "Mother, why do you seek to frighten me like a feeble child whose heart knows few words of blame, a fearful babe that fears its mother's scolding? Nay, but I will try whatever plan is best, and so feed myself and you continually. We will not be content to remain here, as you bid, alone of all the gods unfee'd with offerings and prayers. Better to live in fellowship with the deathless gods continually, rich, wealthy, and enjoying stores of grain, than to sit always in a gloomy cave: and, as regards **honor** (ἄμφι δὲ τιμῆς), I too will enter upon the rite that Apollo has. If **my father** will not give it me, I will seek – and I am able – to be a prince of robbers..." (Hermes to Maia; transl. H. G. Evelyn-White).

<sup>17</sup> J. Strauss-Clay, *The Hecate of the "Theogony"*, GRBS XXV, 1984, p. 27-38.

<sup>18</sup> *Th.* 411–452: "And she conceived and bore Hecate whom Zeus the son of Cronos honored above all. He gave her splendid gifts, **to have a share** of the earth and the unfruitful sea. She received honor also in starry heaven, and is honored exceedingly by the deathless gods. For to this day, **whenever** (ὅτε ποῦ) any one of men on earth offers rich sacrifices and prays for favor according to custom, he calls upon Hecate. Great honor comes full easily to him whose prayers the goddess receives favorably, and she bestows wealth upon him; for the power surely is with her. For as many as were born of Earth and Ocean **amongst all these she has her due portion**. The son of Cronos did her no wrong nor took anything away of all that was her portion among the former Titan gods: but she holds, as the division was at the first from the beginning, privilege both in earth, and in heaven, and in sea. Also, because she is an only child, the goddess receives not less honor, but much more still, for Zeus honors her. Whom she will she greatly aids and advances: she sits by worshipful kings in judgement, and in the assembly whom she will is distinguished among the people. And when men arm themselves for the battle that destroys men, then the goddess is at hand to give victory and grant glory readily to whom she will. Good is she also when men contend at the games, for there too the goddess is with them and profits them: and he who by might and strength gets the victory wins the rich prize easily with joy, and brings glory to his parents. And she is good to stand by horsemen, whom she will: and to those whose business is in the grey discomfortable sea, and who **pray to Hecate and the loud-crashing Earth-Shaker**, easily the glorious goddess gives great catch, and easily she takes it away as soon as seen, if so she will. She is good in the byre with Hermes to increase the stock. The droves of kine and wide herds of goats and flocks of fleecy sheep, if she will, she increases from a few, or makes many to be less. So, then, albeit

poem is important, since it falls almost in the centre, and is followed immediately by the birth story of Zeus, after which comes the all-important scene of prototypical sacrifice, which I will want to discuss next. This *Hymn* could reflect Hesiod's own and especially reverent attitude to the goddess, or it could belong to the common theology shared by his audience, but either way it is confusing. Hecate is represented as respected by Zeus, and by gods in general, above all other deities, and she has a share in three realms similar to those ruled over by Zeus and his brothers. Humans seem to pray to her for everything, from wealth through success in public speaking, through victory in war and games, through a good catch of fish and fertility of the herds to rearing the youth. There is in fact not much point in listing all the spheres of her influence, "for however many gods were born of Earth and Heaven and received an honour, she has a share in them all".<sup>19</sup> But the key to Hesiod's Hecate and her power lies in the following passage: "for also now, when one of the men who live on Earth prays according to custom, offering beautiful sacrifice, he calls upon Hecate..."<sup>20</sup> Which should stop us in our tracks: what, always? What if he wants to pray to Aphrodite or Hermes instead? But then "those who till the grey stormy sea pray to Hecate and to the loud-crashing Earth-shaker"; and "with Hermes, she has the power to multiply the flock in the folds".<sup>21</sup> Not *alongside* Hermes, apparently, but *together with* him, assisting or co-operating. And so Hecate is revealed as the goddess to whom people prayed to give their prayer validity, to better reach the more specialized deity. That is, she presided over prayer and sacrifice and mediated between the two worlds. A most felicitous interpretation, since it allows us to make better sense of Hecate's epithet ἄγγελος, and prepares ground for the role she would later play as patron goddess of magic, granting efficacy to spells, most of which were, after all, a kind of prayer.

The typical Greek sacrifice is, in short, ritual slaughter followed by burning the part that belongs to the gods and eating the rest. And of course the gods' part is not very edible, thanks to the first sacrifice ever, described by Hesiod in the *Theogony*<sup>22</sup> as a trick of Prometheus. It is common to think

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her mother's only child, she is honored amongst all the deathless gods. And the son of Cronos made her a nurse of the young who after that day saw with their eyes the light of all-seeing Dawn. So from the beginning she is a nurse of the young, and these are her honors." (τιμαί; transl. H. G. Evelyn-White).

<sup>19</sup> My literal translation of lines 421–422.

<sup>20</sup> As above, 416–418.

<sup>21</sup> As above, 440–441 and 444.

<sup>22</sup> *Th.* 535–541: "For when the gods and mortal men were separating at Mecone, then he (Prometheus) was willing to serve a great ox, wishing to deceive the mind of Zeus. To one side (τῷ μὲν, τοῖς μὲν) he set, in a hide, the meat and the entrails, rich with fat, hiding them

that the trick lay in cheating the gods out of good meat by disguising it under the ugly stomach, but a different interpretation, more faithful I believe to the text, has been proposed by Eliot Wirshbo,<sup>23</sup> who suggested, very convincingly, that when the gods and mortals ἐκρίνοντο at Mecone, it was because they “were separating” (after an original period of commensality, also to be found in Hesiod),<sup>24</sup> not because they “were quarrelling” or “went to court”. That this particular shared feast would be the last was apparently Prometheus’ doing. The titan did make two very unequal portions, but Zeus **saw through the trick**. That line (551) West<sup>25</sup> explained away as inserted later to save Zeus’ wisdom at the cost of the story’s coherence, but Wirshbo’s analysis allows us to keep it as part of the original text.

It is Zeus who chose the gods’ portion; Prometheus deceit must lie somewhere else. In fact, his fault was simply to introduce inequality, to disrupt the balance of the “equal feast”, δαίς ἕση. So, Zeus’ anger was caused by Prometheus driving a wedge between the two groups; and so the type of sacrifice initiated in Mecone would remain a symbol of the separation, and by contrast of community among the human participants.

Now to return to the *Hymn to Hermes*, there is in it the puzzling scene in which the baby god slaughtered two cows.<sup>26</sup> Whatever he did, it was not normal Greek sacrifice, whose prototype we just saw in the *Theogony*. Rather, it resembled a feast to which he invited the gods, hoping to be in-

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under the stomach; to the other (τῷ δέ, τοῖς δέ), he assigned the white bones of the ox, arranging them with cunning art and covering them with shining fat.” And 550–552: “But Zeus, whose wisdom is everlasting, knew very well what the trick was and thought in his heart of the evils which were to befall mortals.” And 556–557: “Since then, the tribes of humans upon the earth have been burning on fragrant altars white bones to the immortal gods.” (transl. mine).

<sup>23</sup> E. Wirshbo, *The Mekone scene in the “Theogony”: Prometheus as Trickster*, GRBS XXIII, 1982, p. 101–110.

<sup>24</sup> Hes. fr. 1.6–7 West-Merkelbach: “For back then, common were the feasts and common were the assemblies of the immortal gods and mortal men.” (my transl.).

<sup>25</sup> *Hesiod. Theogony*, ed. with prolegomena and commentary by M.L. West, Clarendon Press 1988, p. 321.

<sup>26</sup> *H. Hom.* 4.116–123: “And while the strength of glorious Hephaestus was beginning to kindle the fire, he **dragged out** two **lowing**, horned cows close to the fire; for great strength was with him. He threw them both **panting** upon their backs on the ground, and rolled them on their sides, bending their necks over, and **pierced their vital chord**. Then he went on from task to task: first he cut up the rich, fatted meat, and pierced it with wooden spits, and roasted flesh and the honorable chine and the paunch full of dark blood **all together**.” Then 126–133: “Next glad-hearted Hermes dragged the rich meats he had prepared and put them on a smooth, flat stone, and divided them into twelve portions distributed by lot, making each portion wholly honorable. Then glorious Hermes longed for the sacrificial meat (δοίης κρεάων), for the sweet savour wearied him, god though he was; nevertheless his proud heart was not prevailed upon to devour the flesh, although he greatly desired...” (apparently “to get it down his holy throat”; transl. H. G. Evelyn-White).

cluded as one of them (which was after all his goal throughout the story). Uncertain yet of his divine parentage, he behaved not like a god but like a man towards the gods; not like one who sacrifices a cow, but like one who slaughters it for secular consumption, and only after the meat is cooked, designates a part as food offering, or *τραπέζωμα*. The difference was crucial for him, because if the standard sacrifice expressed distance, the food offering meant proximity, or at least human desire for it. When the swineherd Eumaeus offered cooked food to the gods in the *Odyssey*, it went to Hermes and the nymphs, the deities closest to humanity.<sup>27</sup>

I believe these two passages, both concerned with trickster gods who are also teachers and civilisers of the human race, clarify the nature of these two types of offering, assigning to them not only aetiologies, but also the two opposing attitudes to the divine which they express, one of seeking distance, hopefully friendly but uninvolved, the other of trying to regain the lost golden-age familiarity. And of course, both reiterate the fundamental community-building role of food in ritual; to share a meal in a religious context was to share membership.

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<sup>27</sup> On Eumaeus' sacrifice and the *τραπέζωμα*, see E. Kadletz, *The sacrifice of Eumaios the Pig Herder*, GRBS XXV, 1984, p. 99-105.