

THE GREEK VIEW OF LIFE

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FIFTEENTH EDITION

METHUEN & CO. LTD.
36 ESSEX STREET W.C.
LONDON

PREFACE TO THE SEVENTH EDITION

IN preparing this edition for the press I have endeavoured to correct any positive mis-statement of fact. But I have not attempted to correct what may be regarded by some critics as an incompleteness or over-emphasis of statement. This objection is likely to be taken in particular to the first chapter. Recent research has discovered, or brought into new prominence, the tangled mass of primitive superstitions which underlay the literary and artistic presentation of Greek religion, and persisted among the populace throughout the classical age. If I had taken all this into account I should have had to modify or supplement my statement, especially with regard to the attitude of the Greek towards death; and I should have had constantly to refer to the historical development of their religious conceptions and rituals. But all this, I think I may justly say, lies outside the province of this book. I have concerned myself to present the specific achievement of the Greek spirit, as reflected

in the works of their most enlightened poets and thinkers. That achievement was to humanize barbarism and enlighten superstition. It is the resulting point of view that gives a unique value to the study of Greek institutions, thought and art; and it is this point of view which I have endeavoured in the following pages to introduce to English readers unversed in Greek studies.

I have to thank Miss Jane Harrison, Professor Murray, and Mr. J. T. Sheppard for valuable criticism and suggestions, which I have incorporated, as far as possible, in the text of this edition.

PREFACE

THE following pages are intended to serve as a general introduction to Greek literature and thought, for those, primarily, who do not know Greek. Whatever opinions may be held as to the value of translations, it seems clear that it is only by their means that the majority of modern readers can attain to any knowledge of Greek culture; and as I believe that culture to be still, as it has been in the past, the most valuable element of a liberal education, I have hoped that such an attempt as the present to give, with the help of quotations from the original authors, some general idea of the Greek view of life, will not be regarded as labour thrown away.

It has been essential to my purpose to avoid, as far as may be, all controversial matter; and if any classical scholar who may come across this volume should be inclined to complain of omissions or evasions, I would beg him to remember the object of the book and to judge it according to its fitness for its own end.

"The Greek View of Life," no doubt, is a question-begging title, but I believe it to have a quite intelligible meaning; for varied and manifold as the phases may be that are presented by the Greek civilization, they do nevertheless group themselves

about certain main ideas, to be distinguished with sufficient clearness from those which have dominated other nations. It is these ideas that I have endeavoured to bring into relief; and if I have failed, the blame, I submit, must be ascribed rather to myself than to the nature of the task I have undertaken.

For permission to make the extracts from translations here printed, my best thanks are due to the following authors and publishers:—Professor Butcher, Mr. Andrew Lang, Mr. E. D. A. Morshead, Mr. B. B. Rogers, Dr. Verrall, Mr. A. S. Way, Messrs. George Bell and Sons, the Syndics of the Cambridge University Press, the Delegates of the Clarendon Press, Oxford, Messrs. Macmillan and Co., Mr. John Murray, and Messrs. Sampson Low, Marston and Co. I have also to thank the Master and Fellows of Balliol College, Oxford, for permission to quote at considerable length from the late Professor Jowett's translations of Plato and Thucydides.

Appended is a list of the translations from which I have quoted.

LIST OF TRANSLATIONS USED

ÆSCHYLUS (B.C. 525—456). "**The House of Atreus**" (*i.e.* the "**Agamemnon**," "**Choephoræ**" and "**Eumenides**"), translated by E. D. A. MORSHEAD (Warren and Sons).

The "**Eumenides**," translated by DR. VERRALL (Cambridge, 1885).

ARISTOPHANES (C. B.C. 444—380). "**The Acharnians, the Knights and the Birds**," translated by JOHN HOOKHAM FRERE (Morley's Universal Library, Routledge).

[Also the "**Frogs**" and the "**Peace**" in his Collected Works (Pickering)].

The "**Clouds**," the "**Lysistrata**" ["**Women in Revolt**"], the "**Peace**," and the "**Wasps**," translated by B. B. ROGERS.

ARISTOTLE (B.C. 384—322). The "**Ethics**," the "**Politics**," and the "**Rhetoric**," translated by J. E. C. WELLDON (Macmillan and Co.).

DEMOSTHENES (B.C. 385—322). "**Orations**," translated by C. R. KENNEDY (Bell).

EURIPIDES (B.C. 410—406). "**Tragedies**," translated by A. S. WAY (Macmillan and Co.).

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HERODOTUS (B.C. 484—425). "**The History**," translated by S. R. RAWLINSON (Murray).

HOMER. The "**Iliad**," translated by LANG, LEAF AND MYERS; the "**Odyssey**," translated by BUTCHER AND LANG (Macmillan).

PINDAR (B.C. 522—442). "**Odes**," translated by E. MYERS (Macmillan and Co.).

PLATO (B.C. 430—347). The "**Dialogues**," translated by B. JOWETT (Clarendon Press).

"**The Republic**," translated by DAVIES AND VAUGHAN (Macmillan and Co.).

PLUTARCH. "**Lives**," DRYDEN'S translation, edited by A. CLOUGH (Sampson Low, Marston and Co.).

SOPHOCLES (B.C. 496—406). Edited and Translated by Dr. JEBB (Cambridge University Press).

THUCYDIDES (b. B.C. 471), edited and translated by B. JOWETT (Clarendon Press).

<i>First Published</i>	. . .	<i>September 1896</i>
<i>Second Edition</i>	. . .	<i>January 1898</i>
<i>Third Edition</i>	. . .	<i>November 1903</i>
<i>Fourth Edition</i>	. . .	<i>November 1905</i>
<i>Fifth Edition</i>	. . .	<i>November 1906</i>
<i>Sixth Edition</i>	. . .	<i>April 1907</i>
<i>Seventh Edition</i>	. . .	<i>March 1909</i>
<i>Eighth Edition</i>	. . .	<i>December 1912</i>
<i>Ninth Edition</i>	. . .	<i>October 1914</i>
<i>Tenth Edition</i>	. . .	<i>March 1916</i>
<i>Eleventh Edition</i>	. . .	<i>February 1918</i>
<i>Twelfth Edition</i>	. . .	<i>December 1919</i>
<i>Thirteenth Edition</i>	. . .	<i>August 1920</i>
<i>Fourteenth Edition</i>	. . .	<i>July 1922</i>
<i>Fifteenth Edition</i>	. . .	<i>1924</i>

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

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THE GREEK VIEW OF LIFE

CHAPTER I

THE GREEK VIEW OF RELIGION

§ I. INTRODUCTORY

IN approaching the subject of the religion of the Greeks it is necessary to dismiss at the outset many of the associations which we are naturally inclined to connect with that word. What we commonly have in our mind when we speak of religion is a definite set of doctrines, of a more or less metaphysical character, formulated in a creed and supported by an organization distinct from the state. And the first thing we have to learn about the religion of the Greeks is that it included nothing of the kind. There was no church, there was no creed, there were no articles. Priests there were, but they were merely public officials, appointed to perform certain religious rites. The distinction between cleric and layman, as we know it, did not exist; the distinction between poetry and dogma did not exist; and whatever the religion of the Greeks may have been, one thing at any rate is clear, that it was something very different from all that we are in the habit of associating with the word.

What, then, was it? It is easy to reply that it was

the worship of those gods—of Zeus, Apollo, Athene, and the rest—with whose names and histories everyone is familiar. But the difficulty is to realize what was implied in the worship of these gods ; to understand that the mythology which we regard merely as a collection of fables was to the Greeks actually true ; or at least that to nine Greeks out of ten it would never occur that it might be false, might be, as we say, mere stories. So that though no doubt the histories of the gods were in part the inventions of the poets, yet the poets would conceive themselves to be merely putting into form what they and everyone believed to be essentially true.

But such a belief implies a fundamental distinction between the conception, or rather, perhaps, the feeling of the Greeks about the world, and our own. And it is this feeling that we want to understand when we ask ourselves the question, what did a belief in the gods really mean to the ancient Greeks ? To answer it fully and satisfactorily is perhaps impossible. But some attempt must be made ; and it may help us in our quest if we endeavour to imagine the kind of questionings and doubts which the conception of the gods would set at rest.

§ 2. GREEK RELIGION AN INTERPRETATION OF NATURE

When we try to conceive the state of mind of primitive man, the first thing that occurs to us is the bewilderment and terror he must have felt in the presence of the powers of nature. Naked, houseless, weaponless, he is at the mercy, every hour, of this

immense and incalculable Something so alien and so hostile to himself. As fire it burns, as water it drowns, as tempest it harries and destroys; benignant it may be at times, in warm sunshine and calm, but the kindness is brief and treacherous. Anyhow, whatever its mood, it has to be met and dealt with. By its help, or, if not, in the teeth of its resistance, every step in advance must be won; every hour, every minute, it is there to be reckoned with. What is it then, this persistent, obscure, unnameable Thing? What is it? The question haunts the mind; it will not be put aside; and the Greek at last, like other men under similar conditions, only with a lucidity and precision peculiar to himself, makes the reply, "It is something like myself." Every power of nature he presumes to be a spiritual being, impersonating the sky as Zeus, the earth as Demeter, the sea as Poseidon; from generation to generation, under his shaping hands, the figures multiply and define themselves; character and story crystallize about what at first were little more than names; till at last, from the womb of the dark enigma that haunted him in the beginning, there emerges into the charmed light of a world of ideal grace a pantheon of fair and concrete personalities. Nature has become a company of spirits; every cave and fountain is haunted by a nymph; in the ocean dwell the Nereids, in the mountain the Oread, the Dryad in the wood; and everywhere, in groves and marshes, on the pastures or the rocky heights, floating in the current of the streams or traversing untrodden snows, in the day at the chase and as

evening closes in solitude fingering his flute, seen and heard by shepherds, alone or with his dancing train, is to be met the horned and goat-footed, the sunny-smiling Pan.

Thus conceived, the world has become less terrible because more familiar. All that was incomprehensible, all that was obscure and dark, has now been seized and bodied forth in form, so that everywhere man is confronted no longer with blind and unintelligible force, but with spiritual beings moved by like passions with himself. The gods, it is true, were capricious and often hostile to his good, but at least they had a nature akin to his; if they were angry, they might be propitiated; if they were jealous, they might be appeased; the enmity of one might be compensated by the friendship of another; dealings with them, after all, were not so unlike dealings with men, and at the worst there was always a chance for courage, patience and wit.

Man, in short, by his religion has been made at home in the world; and that is the first point to seize upon. To drive it home, let us take an illustration from the story of Odysseus.

Odysseus, it will be remembered, after the sack of Troy, for ten years was a wanderer on the seas, by tempest, enchantment, and every kind of danger detained, as it seemed, beyond hope of return from the wife and home he had left in Ithaca. The situation is forlorn enough. Yet, somehow or other, beauty in the story predominates over terror. And this, in part at least, because the powers with which Odysseus has to do are not mere forces of nature,

blind and indifferent, but spiritual beings who take an interest, for or against, in his fate. The whole story becomes familiar, and, if one may say so, comfortable, by the fact that it is conducted under the control and direction of the gods. Listen, for example, to the Homeric account of the onset of a storm, and observe how it sets one at ease with the elements:

"Now the lord, the shaker of the earth, on his way from the Ethiopians, espied Odysseus afar off from the mountains of the Solymi: even thence he saw him as he sailed over the deep; and he was yet more angered in spirit, and wagging his head he communed with his own heart. 'Lo now, it must be that the gods at the last have changed their purpose concerning Odysseus, while I was away among the Ethiopians. And now he is nigh to the Phæacian land, where it is so ordained that he escape the great issues of the woe which hath come upon him. But methinks, that even yet I will drive him far enough in the path of suffering.'

"With that he gathered the clouds and troubled the waters of the deep, grasping his trident in his hands; and he roused all storms of all manner of winds, and shrouded in clouds the land and sea: and down sped night from heaven. The East Wind and the South Wind clashed, and the stormy West, and the North, that is born in the bright air, rolling onward a great wave."¹

The position of the hero is terrible, it is true, but not with the terror of despair; for as it is a god that wrecked him, it may also be a god that will save. If

¹ Odyss. v 282.—Translated by Butcher and Lang.

Poseidon is his enemy, Athene, he knows, is his friend ; and all lies, after all, in the hands, or, as the Greeks said, "on the knees," not of a blind destiny, but of beings accessible to prayer.

Let us take another passage from Homer to illustrate the same point. It is the place where Achilles is endeavouring to light the funeral pyre of Patroclus, but because there is no wind the fire will not catch. What is he to do ? What *can* he do ? Nothing, say we, but wait till the wind comes. But to the Greek the winds are persons, not elements ; Achilles has only to call and to promise, and they will listen to his voice. And so, we are told, "Fleet-footed noble Achilles had a further thought : standing aside from the pyre he prayed to the two winds of North and West, and promised them fair offerings, and pouring large libations from a golden cup besought them to come, that the corpses might blaze up speedily in the fire, and the wood make haste to be enkindled. Then Iris, when she heard his prayer, went swiftly with the message to the Winds. They within the house of the gusty West Wind were feasting all together at meat, when Iris sped thither, and halted on the threshold of stone. And when they saw her with their eyes, they sprung up and called to her every one to sit by him. But she refused to sit, and spake her word : 'No seat for me ; I must go back to the streams of Ocean, to the Ethiopians' land where they sacrifice hecatombs to the immortal gods, that I too may feast at their rites. But Achilles is praying the North Wind and the loud West to come, and promising them fair offerings, that ye may make

the pyre be kindled whereon lieth Patroclus, for whom all the Achaians are making moan.'

"She having thus said departed, and they arose with a mighty sound, rolling the clouds before them. And swiftly they came blowing over the sea, and the wave rose beneath their shrill blast; and they came to deep-soiled Troy, and fell upon the pile, and loudly roared the mighty fire. So all night drave they the flame of the pyre together, blowing shrill; and all night fleet Achilles, holding a two-handled cup, drew wine from a golden bowl, and poured it forth and drenched the earth, calling upon the spirit of hapless Patroclus. As a father waileth when he burneth the bones of his son, new-married, whose death is woe to his hapless parents, so wailed Achilles as he burnt the bones of his comrade, going heavily round the burning pile, with many moans.

"But at the hour when the Morning Star goeth forth to herald light upon the earth, the star that saffron-mantled Dawn cometh after, and spreadeth over the salt sea, then grew the burning faint, and the flame died down. And the Winds went back again to betake them home over the Thracian main, and it roared with a violent swell. Then the son of Peleus turned away from the burning and lay down wearied, and sweet sleep leapt on him."¹

The exquisite beauty of this passage, even in translation, will escape no lover of poetry. And it is a beauty which depends on the character of the Greek religion; on the fact that all that is unintelligible in the world, all that is alien to man, has been drawn,

¹ Iliad xxiii. p. 193.—Translated by Lang, Leaf and Myers.