

高级实用英语系列教材



西方文明起源导读

A GUIDE TO THE TWO SOURCES OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

[英] 马克·巴克(Mark Buck) 陈红薇 编著

 中国人民大学出版社

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PREFACE



This book aims to provide a short introduction to undergraduate students embarking on courses that will involve them in studying western culture, particularly western literature, art and history. Until very recently the study of Greek and Roman culture, and of the classical languages of Greek and Latin in particular, was a major feature of western education. Until very recently too most educated westerners had a fairly extensive knowledge of the Bible, as a result both of their education and of religious observance. So western writers assumed a quite detailed knowledge of both Greek Mythology and the Bible in everything they wrote. A working knowledge of these two very large areas is therefore a necessary key to understanding most western literature and art.

The book's first object is therefore to select from what is very extensive and often very complex material only what is most essential for students to master first. However, we have been reluctant to restrict ourselves and our readers to a purely factual and narrative presentation of the subject. One of the most unfortunate aspects of any study of this material is the large amount of factual detail, especially names, that needs to be absorbed. We have tried to keep this to a minimum. Otherwise, the bad habit of only learning by heart will be reinforced and, although the stories are often quirky and entertaining, there is a danger that overload will kill off any interest.

There is no need for that. When studying Greek myths and the books of the Bible, we can place them in their historical context and ask what they tell us about the people who told or wrote these stories. We can detect their values and judge them against the values of other ancient civilizations and against our own values today. We can seek to explain these values in the light of the contexts from which they spring.

There is also some room for textual criticism. Stories and myths are transformed as they are repeated. They are often used for purposes quite different from those intended by their creators. There is therefore a need for critical analysis, especially when dealing with the Bible. It is important to treat the Bible as a series of historical documents and to apply the same rules of

textual criticism to them as one would apply to any other text. This is not to denigrate a text which many regard as sacred; it is to enable a deeper, more mature and more relevant understanding of it.

To promote these objectives at an early stage of learning, we have offered questions at the end of each unit. We have deliberately avoided setting questions of the “True or False” or multiple choice variety. This kind of questioning inculcates in students the notion that there is a right answer, and so reinforces any propensity to thoughtless learning by rote. Many of the questions we ask are open to a wide range of answers. They are intended to invite students to engage with the material and the debates it can provoke.

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March 2015

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GREEK MYTHOLOGY





UNIT 1



WHAT IS MYTH?



Storytelling

The English word “myth” comes from the Greek **μῦθος** meaning a story. Today we are so used to a world in which the printed or electronic word is easily available that it is easy to forget that in more ancient civilizations writing was a specialized skill, rather like that of a calligrapher today. In ancient civilizations information was transmitted far more by the spoken word than by the written word. The stories which make up Greek mythology would have first been passed orally from one generation to another.

Of course, we have no recordings of ancient peoples speaking aloud. But the spoken word was reinforced by visual images and there is plenty of evidence of ancient Greek art. The stories that make up the Greek myths are often first found in the painting on Greek vases. About 100,000 vases survive from ancient Greece. The images become far more sophisticated from the late 7th century B.C.. The superman Herakles was a highly popular subject.



One Version or Many?

So myths were originally transmitted by oral or visual means. And of course there were lots of different people telling these stories. So the ways they told them soon began to vary. Quickly there began to be many versions of the same story. So there are many versions of the Greek myths. However, that is not something that should concern us. There is no need for us to try to establish

a single authentic version. It's not the case that there is one correct version and all the others are wrong.^[1]

We should next consider *how* anything that is transmitted orally is likely to be transformed as it passes from one storyteller to another. Most probably, the storyteller wishes to impress; at the very least he wants to hold the audience's attention. So he develops and elaborates what he has to tell. He knows that people are fascinated by what is exceptional, by deeds which exceed what normal humans are capable of, by what can be called "epic" tales. So the stories become more and more fantastic. Many of them may have a basis in fact, but the facts have become elaborated and dramatized with the telling of them.

So it is not surprising that there are many inconsistencies and different versions of the Greek myths as we know them today. And it is not surprising that many of the myths are stories that enter the realm of fantasy to the point of absurdity.



Why Tell Stories?

We need to ask ourselves: Why do people tell each other stories? We have already identified one simple reason: to impress and hold the attention of the listener. But there are other reasons too. One is the need to explain the world around us—how it all began; Man's powerlessness in the face of Nature; the psychological strengths and weaknesses of human nature. This needs to explain and make sense of the world and the human condition goes a long way to account not only for the Greek myths but also for the myths which every civilization and people develop.

For the Greeks were not unique. Other civilizations and religions have their "myths" too, even though they may not call them that. Many people are unwilling to call many of the stories in the Bible "myths." But that is what they are. The account of the creation of the world and the fall of man at the start of the Bible is a myth. As we shall see later, it tells us something about the human condition, the fallible and fallen (but not evil) nature of man. And what it tells us is, arguably, eternally true. The story was expressed in a way we would not express it today, but the truth that lies behind it remains relevant.

[1] Indeed, so far as we know, the Greeks themselves did not worry about establishing a single authentic collection of all the myths. There is no surviving textbook of Greek myths in the ancient world until a book called the *Library* of Pseudo-Apollodorus in the 2nd century A.D. ("Pseudo" means "lying, false, pretending to be something that it is not." The *Library* was attributed to Apollodorus of Athens, a Greek scholar born in 180 B.C. However, it cannot all have been written by him as it discusses events which occurred after he had died. Hence the author is generally referred to as "Pseudo-Apollodorus.")



Are Myths “True” or “False”?

One reason why some people are reluctant to call stories in the Bible “myths” is that the word “myth” has developed a meaning it never originally had. In everyday use today, it means something that is “not true,” not scientifically proven. So to say that something is a “myth” is to say that it should be rejected and disbelieved. Certainly the great majority of the Greek myths, like the myth of the Creation and the Fall in the Bible, if they are taken literally, contradict sense and science and cannot be true. However, there are different kinds of Truth. It is possible for a story which is not literally true to convey a psychological truth. This is the case with many of the Greek myths and with many of the stories in the Bible. There are many Chinese myths which have a value of this kind too.



Why Ancient Myths Survive in the Modern World?

We have already argued that myths changed because, before the written word was common, storytellers in the ancient world elaborated and developed them. We need also to notice that the changes did not stop with the arrival of the written word. A good story is referred to, repeated and used by generation after generation. The way it is used reflects the concerns and interests of each succeeding generation. So these changes tell us a great deal about the societies that made use of the myths.

Furthermore, until the mid-20th century a classical education in Greek and Latin was common in western society, as was knowledge of the Bible. For this reason, writers, poets, painters, sculptors and musicians readily used ancient myths and the Bible as material to enrich their work, to make a point, to draw a parallel, to reinforce a perception about human psychology or simply to be elegant and show off. So ancient myths and biblical narratives have become deeply embedded in western culture. Some ages have used them more extensively and more skillfully than others but right up to the present day they are essential to an understanding of western culture.

The Romans adopted and re-named the Greek gods, sometimes combining their cults with other eastern cults they encountered as their territories expanded.

Despite its rejection of polytheism, in the Middle Ages Christianity preserved many classical texts, and hence the myths in them. This was mainly because these texts provided material for language training, Latin being the language of the church. As a consequence the myths were preserved.

At the Renaissance, the rediscovery of ancient Greece and Rome led to a widespread revival of interest in Greek and Roman mythology, much of which was absorbed through the medium of the Roman poet Ovid. Botticelli, Titian, Rubens and many other artists portrayed not only Christian themes but also the pagan subjects of Greek mythology. As we shall see, the Greek gods have very human features and characteristics (unlike ancient Chinese gods), so ancient Greek and Roman “humanism” was attractive at the Renaissance, which placed new stress on the realization of human potential.

Shakespeare and Milton assumed that their readers would have a close knowledge of the Greek myths. The late 17th century French dramatist Racine re-worked many of the myths in his tragedies.^[1] For the composer Handel in the 18th century they formed the subjects of some of his operas.

In the early 19th century the romantics displayed a new enthusiasm for all things Greek. As we shall see later, the myth of Prometheus appealed particularly to revolutionaries looking for a model of heroic self-sacrifice and struggle against tyranny. And in the 20th century Freud used Greek myths, particularly the myth of Oedipus, as the basis of the new science of psychoanalysis.

To approach western culture without some knowledge of Greek mythology would therefore be to seek to enter a building without having first secured the key to its front gate.

Questions to Consider

1. Many myths have their origins in historical events. However, how is myth different from history?
2. There are many versions of many myths. Are all versions of equal value? If not, how should the more valuable be distinguished from the less valuable?
3. What are the major myths in Chinese culture? What is their purpose? Do they seek to entertain by recounting an interesting story? Do they have religious significance? Are they a way of transmitting wisdom? Do they define what it is to be Chinese?
4. Why is it negative today to say “That’s a myth”? Should we regard with suspicion everything that is mythical?
5. What do we mean when we say that something can be *psychologically* true although it is not

[1] In *La Thébaïde* (1664), which covers the story of the wars between the sons of Oedipus, and also the death of Antigone; *Andromaque* (1667); *Iphigénie* (1674), where Racine alters the ending from the one found in Euripides; and *Phèdre* (1677).

literally true?

6. Is it disrespectful to say that there is much that is mythical in the Bible?
7. Compose your own myth to illustrate a truth about the human condition.



SHOCKING BEHAVIOUR^[1]

One of the most basic questions to excite human curiosity is the question of how the world began. We are still searching for the answer to that question today. Ancient peoples asked the question too. In fact, it was a question which concerned them even more than it concerns us. We live today in a world dominated by science and technology, in a world in which man has increasingly used his ingenuity to control his natural environment. However, in the ages before the rise of science and when technology was still primitive, Nature seemed far more powerful, majestic and threatening. This was particularly the case in ancient Greece, with its many mountainous areas and its coast and islands surrounded by the sea.^[2] So how did the ancient Greeks explain the origins of the universe? Here is a summary of their account of how things began.^[3] Be warned: you will find it utterly revolting.



The Beginning of the World: Titans and Olympians

In the beginning there was **Chaos** or nothingness. Out of the Chaos emerged **Gaia** (the Earth), **Eros** (Love) and **Tartarus** (the Abyss or Hell). Without any male assistance, Gaia gave birth to

[1] Throughout the book, the names of the gods are given in Greek followed by the Latin version in brackets.

[2] Some commentators contrast this with ancient China, an inland culture in which people lived in harmony with the natural environment rather than regarding it as hostile.

[3] Greek mythology's account of the beginning of the world is found in the *Theogony* of **Hesiod**. Hesiod lived in the latter half of the 8th century B.C. and was a near contemporary of Homer. His epic poem, the *Theogony*, contains the creation myth that came to be accepted by most Greeks. "Theogony" means "origin of the gods."

Uranus (the Sky) and the giant **one-eyed Cyclopes**.^[1]

Uranus (the Sky) then fertilized Gaia (the Earth), who gave birth to the **Titans**, six male and six female. (The modern adjective “titanic,” meaning gigantic or colossal, is derived from “Titan.”) However, Uranus was afraid that his own children might usurp his throne, and so he drove them all down to earth. This angered Gaia, who persuaded the youngest male Titan, **Kronos (Saturn)**, to castrate his father,^[2] with the result that Kronos (Saturn) took over as the ruler of the universe. Kronos then married his sister, Rhea, and established domination over the other Titans.

Having treated his father in this way, Kronos feared that any children to whom Rhea gave birth would treat him in the same way. So every time Rhea gave birth, he snatched up the child and ate it. In this way Kronos swallowed five of his children.^[3] However, when Rhea gave birth to a sixth, **Zeus (Jupiter)**, she wrapped up a stone in baby’s clothing and fed it to her husband in place of Zeus, while she sent Zeus to Mount Ida^[4] to be protected by Nymphs.^[5] By the time Kronos discovered what had happened, it was too late.



The Victory of Zeus

When Zeus had grown up, he gave his father a drugged drink which caused Kronos to vomit, throwing up Rhea’s other children and the stone. He then challenged Kronos to fight for dominion over the gods. With the help of the Cyclopes, who provided him with thunderbolts, Zeus and his siblings were victorious and Kronos and his sibling Titans were hurled down to imprisonment in Tartarus. Zeus became the ruler of **Olympus**,^[6] married his sister, **Hera (Juno)**, and distributed

[1] As Gaia’s actions were not regulated by anyone other than herself, the theory advanced by James Lovelock in the 1960s that the earth is self-regulating was termed the “Gaia principle.”

[2] When Kronos castrated his father Uranus and threw his genitalia into the sea, the Furies emerged from the drops of blood, while Aphrodite, the goddess of love, was born from the sea foam (which is depicted in the famous painting by Botticelli). The **Furies**, who are sometimes called the Erinyes (the angry ones) and sometimes the Eumenides (the gracious ones), were female spirits seeking vengeance. They pursued humans who broke natural laws. So, for example, they pursued Orestes, who had murdered his mother, Clytemnestra, the wife of Agamemnon.

[3] Hestia (Vesta), Demeter (Ceres), Hera (Juno), Poseidon (Neptune) and Hades (Pluto).

[4] There are two Mount Idas in Greek mythology. This is the **Mount Ida in Crete**. The other, in what is today Turkey, was where the judgment of Paris was allegedly conducted.

[5] **Nymphs** were female spirits of the rivers.

[6] **Mount Olympus**, the highest mountain in Greece, was where Zeus and his siblings, the Olympian gods, resided.