

Greek Religious “Beliefs”*

(*Students should be **listening and taking notes** as we cover this portion.

The underlined sentences were repeated for emphasis and I encouraged you to write that information down.

I don't want you to write “verbatim” notes, but to put the information in your own words.

Your notes **title** in your journal should match the heading at the top of this page.)

The Greeks did not have a term for "religion" in the sense of a dimension of existence distinct from all others, and grounded in the belief that the gods exercise authority over the fortunes of human beings and demand recognition as a condition for salvation. The Greeks spoke of their religious doings as "*ta theia*" (literally, "things having to do with the gods"), but this loose usage did not imply the existence of any authoritative set of "beliefs." Indeed, the Greeks did not have a word for "belief" in either of the two senses familiar to us. Since the existence of the gods was a given, it would have made no sense to ask whether someone "believed" that the gods existed. On the other hand, individuals could certainly show themselves to be more or less mindful of the gods, but the common term for that possibility was "*nomizein*", a word related to "*nomos*" ("custom," "customary distribution," "law"); to *nomizein* the gods was to acknowledge their rightful place in the scheme of things, and to act accordingly by giving them their due. Some bold individuals could *nomizein* the gods, but deny that they were due some of the customary observances. But these customary observances were highly unsystematic.

There was a hierarchy of deities, with Zeus, the king of the gods, having a level of control over all the others. Each deity generally had dominion over a certain aspect of nature, for instance, Poseidon ruled over the sea and earthquakes, and Hyperion ruled over the sun. Other deities ruled over an abstract concept, for instance Eros controlled love.

Whilst being immortal, the gods were not all powerful. They had to obey fate, which overrode all. For instance, in mythology, it was Odysseus' fate to return home to Ithaca after the Trojan War, and the gods could only lengthen his journey and make it harder for him, but they could not stop him.

The gods acted like humans, and had human vices. They would interact with humans, sometimes even spawning children with them. At times certain gods would be opposed to another, and they would try to outdo each other. For instance, in the Trojan war, the god Poseidon supported Troy, but Zeus and Athena supported the Greeks.

The most powerful gods were known as the Olympians, of which there were twelve. They were:

- **Zeus**, god of thunder and the sky, and the king of the gods. Husband of Hera, and father to Athena, Apollo, Artemis, Hermes, Persephone, Dionysus and Herakles.
- **Hera**, goddess of women, marriage and motherhood. Wife of Zeus.
- **Poseidon**, god of the sea and earthquakes. Consort of Amphitrite the sea goddess, father of Theseus the hero and Triton the sea messenger.
- **Demeter**, goddess of the harvest, fertility, nature and the seasons. Mother of Persephone the goddess of fertility, Zagreus, Despoina, Arion, Plutus and Philomelus.
- **Ares**, god of war, frenzy, hatred and bloodshed. Father of Cycnus and Eros the god of love.
- **Hermes**, god of commerce, thieves and trade. Messenger to the gods. Father of Pan the horned god, Hermaphroditus, Eros, Tyche, Abderus and Autolycus.
- **Hephaestus**, god of metalcraft, craftsmen, volcanoes and fire. Blacksmith to the gods. Father to King Erichthonius of Athens.
- **Aphrodite**, goddess of sex, love, beauty and fertility. Mother of Eros the god of love.

- **Athena**, goddess of wisdom, crafts and strategic battle.
- **Artemis**, goddess of the hunt, maidens and the moon.
- **Hestia**, goddess of the hearth and home.
- **Apollo**, god of the sun, light, healing, the arts, prophecy, the truth and archery.

The Land of the Dead

One of the most widespread areas of the underworld was known as Hades. This was ruled over by a god, also called Hades. Another realm, called Tartarus, was the place where the damned were thought to go, a place of torment. A third realm, Elysium, was a pleasant place where the virtuous dead and initiates in the mystery cults were said to dwell. The underworld commonly featured in mythology and literature based thereupon.

Many different species existed in Greek mythology. Chief among these were the gods and humans, though the Titans also heavily appeared in Greek myths. They predated the Olympian gods, and were hated by them. Lesser species included the half-man, half-horse centaurs, the nature based nymphs (tree nymphs were dryads, sea nymphs were nereids) and the sex-obsessed wildmen satyrs. Some creatures in Greek mythology were monstrous, such as the one-eyed giant Cyclopes, the sea beast Scylla, whirlpool Charybdis and the half-man, half-bull Minotaur.