

How the Myths Began

by Carolyn Sherwin Bailey

Long ago, when our earth was more than two thousand years younger, there was a wonderful place called Mount Olympus at the top of the world that the ancients could see quite clearly with the eyes of hope and faith. It did not matter that the Greek and Roman people had never set foot on this mountain in the clouds. They knew it in story and revered the gods and goddesses who inhabited it.

In the days when the myths were told, Greece was a more beautiful country than any that is the result of civilization to-day, because the national ideal of the Greeks was beauty and they expressed it in whatever they thought, or wrote, or made with their hands. No matter how far away from home the Greeks journeyed they remembered with pride and love their blue bays and seacoast, the fertile valleys and sheep pastures of Arcadia, the sacred grove of Delphi, those great days when their athletes met for games and races at Athens, and the wide plains of Olympia covered and rich with the most perfect temples and statues that the world has ever known. When the Greeks returned the most beloved sight that met their eyes was the flag of their nation flying at Corinth, or the towers of the old citadel that Cadmus had founded at Thebes.

It was the youth time of men, and there were no geographies or histories or books of science to explain to the ancients those things about life that everyone wants to know sooner or later. There was this same longing for truth among the Roman people as well as among the Greeks. The Romans, also, loved their country, and built temples as the Greeks did, every stone of which they carved and fitted as a stepping stone on the way to the abode of the gods.

But who were these gods, and what did a belief in their existence mean to the Greek and Roman people?

There have been certain changes in two thousand years on our earth. We have automobiles instead of chariots, our ships are propelled by steam instead of by a favorable wind, and we have books that attempt to tell us why spring always follows winter and that courage is a better part than cowardice. But we still have hard winters and times when it is most difficult to be brave. We still experience war and famine and crime, and peace and plenty and love in just about the same measure that they were to be found in Greece and Rome. The only difference is that we are a little closer to understanding life than the ancients were. They tried to find a means of knowing life facts and of explaining the miracles of outdoors and of ruling their conduct by their daily intercourse with this higher race of beings, the gods, on Mount Olympus.

There was a gate of clouds on the top of Mount Olympus that the goddesses, who were known as the Seasons, opened to allow the inhabitants of the Mount to descend to the earth and return. Jupiter, the ruler of the gods, sat on the Olympian throne holding thunderbolts and darts of lightning in his mighty hands. The same arts and labors as those of men were practised by these celestial beings. Minerva and her handmaidens, the Graces, wove garments for the goddesses of more exquisite colors and textures than any that could be made by human hands. Vulcan built the houses of the gods of glittering brass. He shaped golden shoes that made it possible for them to travel with great speed, and he shod their steeds so that their chariots could ride upon the water. Hebe fed the gods with nectar and ambrosia, prepared and served by her own fair hands. Mars loosed the dogs of war, and the music of Apollo's lute was the song of victory and peace when war was ended. Ceres tended and blessed the

fields of grain, and Venus, clad in beautiful garments by the Seasons, expressed the desire of the nations, of dumb beasts and of all nature for love.

There were many more than these, making the great immortal family of the gods, like men, but different in their higher understanding of life and its meaning. They lived apart on their Mount, but they descended often to mingle with the people. They stood beside the forge and helped with the harvest, their voices were heard in the rustling leaves in the forest and above the tumult and crash of war. They guarded the flocks and crowned the victors in games and carried brave warriors to Elysian fields after their last battles. They loved adventure and outdoors; they felt joy and knew pain. These gods were the daily companions of the ancients who have given them to us in our priceless inheritance of the classics and art.

When you read the poems of the blind Roman, Homer, and those of Ovid and Virgil; when you see a picture of a columned Greek temple or the statue of the Apollo Belvedere or the Guido Reni painting of Aurora lighting the sky with the torches of day, you, too, are following the age-old stepping stones that led to Mount Olympus. The myths were the inspiration for the greatest writing and architecture and sculpture and painting that the world has ever known. They were more than this.

Among the ruins of the ancient cities there was found one temple with a strange inscription on the altar: "To the unknown God." The temple was placed on Mars Hill as if, out of the horrors of war, this new hope had come to the people.

The word mythology means an account of tales. The myths were just that, tales, but most beautiful and worth while stories. So that people who made them and retold them and lived as the gods would have had them live came, finally, to feel that there was need for them to build this other, last altar.

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