

**When Our Gods Just Don't Get It:
Ancient Myths on the Limitations of Divinity**

Tuesday October 20, 2020, 7:00-9:00pm



UNIVERSITY *of*
DENVER

ENRICHMENT PROGRAM

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Across the mythic landscapes of the ancient world, from the heights of Olympus to the gates of Valhalla to the gardens of Eden, we find traditions asking us to confront – and perhaps even embrace – the possibility that there are limitations to what our gods understand about the worlds over which they preside. Join Richard Sacks, who spent four decades at Columbia University teaching ancient texts such as the *Iliad*, *Odyssey*, *Aeneid*, *Beowulf* and *Genesis*, for an evening's exploration of ancient myths of the west that question the very foundations of our beliefs.

Genealogical Overview of the Greek Olympian Gods

1. Genealogy of the Gods (especially from the Titans to the Olympians)

(Grant & Hazel, *Who's Who in Classical Mythology*, Oxford 1993)

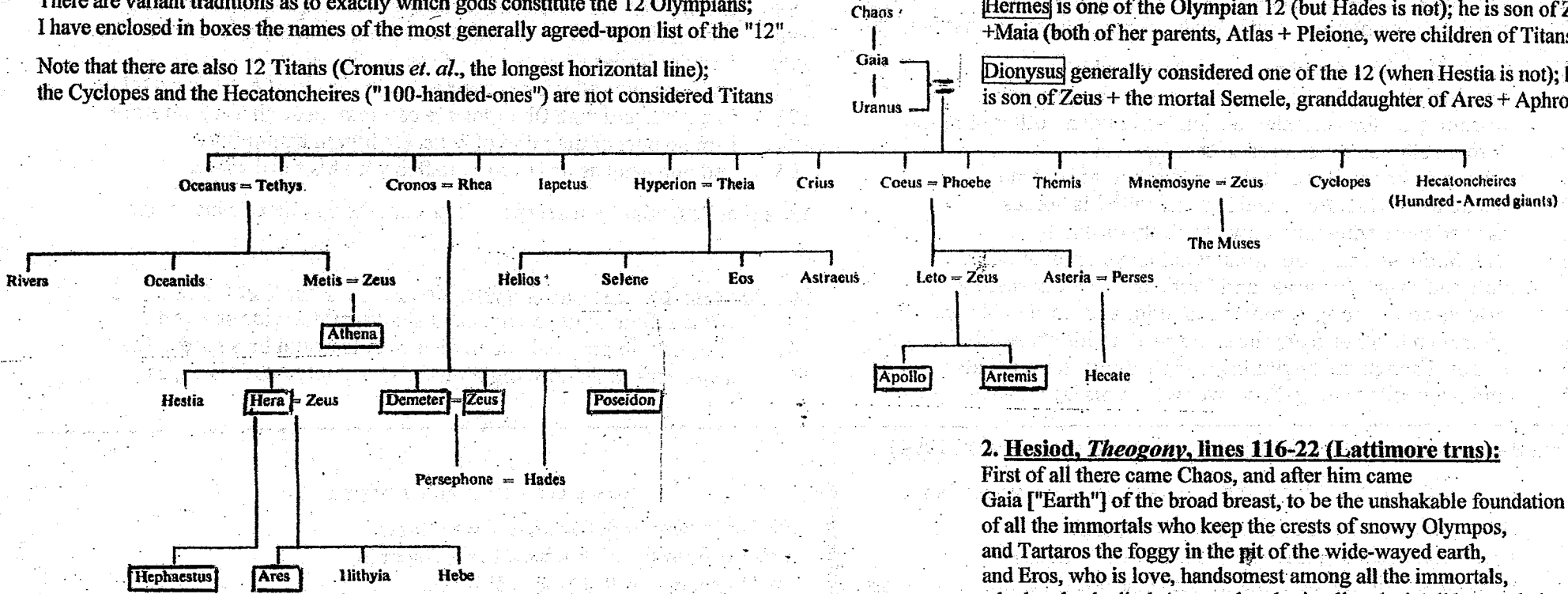
There are variant traditions as to exactly which gods constitute the 12 Olympians; I have enclosed in boxes the names of the most generally agreed-upon list of the "12"

Note that there are also 12 Titans (Cronus *et. al.*, the longest horizontal line); the Cyclopes and the Hecatoncheires ("100-handed-ones") are not considered Titans

Aphrodite is one of the Olympian 12; her "parentage" has variants w/ links to Uranus' dethroning/castration & Zeus' "singularity/Titan-ness"

Hermes is one of the Olympian 12 (but Hades is not); he is son of Zeus + Maia (both of her parents, Atlas + Pleione, were children of Titans)

Dionysus generally considered one of the 12 (when Hestia is not); he is son of Zeus + the mortal Semele, granddaughter of Ares + Aphrodite



2. Hesiod, *Theogony*, lines 116-22 (Lattimore trns):

First of all there came Chaos, and after him came Gaia ["Earth"] of the broad breast, to be the unshakable foundation of all the immortals who keep the crests of snowy Olympos, and Tartaros the foggy in the pit of the wide-eyed earth, and Eros, who is love, handsomest among all the immortals, who breaks the limbs' strength, who in all gods, in all human beings overpowers the intelligence in the breast, and all their shrewd planning.

Very basic overview of gods in the Old Norse/Germanic mythological system

The chief god in the Old Norse system was Oðin. Snorri's narrative seems to indicate that there were 12 other noted male gods of Asgarðr, the home of the Æsir (though not all were born Æsir). But in Snorri's two narrations of the list (1.20ff. and 2.2ff.) there seem to be 13 others, not 12; plus, there is one discrepancy when it comes to who's included:

Most important are:

<u>Name</u>	<u>nature/role</u>	<u>fate at Ragnarök (the "twilight of the gods")</u>
1 Oðin	(chief god)	Oðin is swallowed by the wolf-Fenrir
2 Thor	(most physically powerful god)	Thor kills and is killed by the Midgarð-serpent
3 Freyr	(a Vanir, god of peace & plenty)	Freyr killed by Surtr, the god of fire
4 Baldr	(fairest god in beauty & deed)	<i>Baldr earlier killed (by brother Hóðr) via Loki's plan</i>
5 Heimdall	(lookout for the gods)	Heimdall kills and is killed by Loki
6 Týr	(old god of victory in battle)	<i>Týr earlier maimed by the wolf-Fenrir (also dies at R-r)</i>
7 Loki	(a giant, trickster god, & worse)	kills and is killed by Heimdall

Loki has 3 offspring central to the system: the wolf-Fenrir (raised by the Æsir), the Miðgarð-serpent, and the underworld goddess Hel

Less important are:

8 Njörðr	(a Vanir, father of Freyr)
9 Bragi	(god skilled in words & poetry)
10 Víðarr	(son of Oðin, survives Ragnarök)
11 Váli	(son of Oðin, survives Ragnarök)
12 Höðr	(blind brother of Baldr)
13 Ullr	(god of the bow)
14 Forsetti	(law-giver son of Baldr)
or Hœnir	(Oðin's companion/confidant)

The three most important goddesses (listed by Snorri) are:

1 Frigg	(the wife of Oðin who like him had knowledge of the future)
2 Freyja	(a Vanir and twin sister of Freyr and whose powers extended from love to the dead)
3 Iðun	(Bragi's wife and guardian of the apples of immortality)

Thor's contests (all of which he / his companions lose) at dwelling of Utgarð-Loki (1.46-47)

<u>Contest</u>	<u>Opponent/challenge</u>	<u>Utgarð-Loki's explanation" of loss</u>
Eating contest	Logi	ON <i>logi</i> means "flame, fire"
Foot-race	Hugi	ON <i>hugi</i> means "mind, thought, perception"
Drinking contest	drain a "mega-pint"	cup was connected to earth-encircling ocean
Lifting contest	lift a cat	cat was the earth-encircling Miðgarð-serpent
Wrestling	old woman named Elli	ON <i>elli</i> meand "old age"

Part 2 of Day 6 of Creation in *Genesis*

- 1.26 Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."
- 1.27 So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.
- 1.28 God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth."
- 1.29 God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food."
- 1.30 And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so.
- 1.31 God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day.

What is the image of God up to that point in Genesis?

Day#	1	2	3A	3B	4	5	6A	6B
	light	dome	dry-land	vege- tation	dome lights	dome/sea creatures	land creatures	humans
Exercising dominion (via commands)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Creating	Y	Y	?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Evaluating	Y	—	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y*
Separating	Y	Y	Y	—	Y~	—	—	—
Naming	Y	Y	Y	—	—	—	—	—
Blessing	—	—	—	—	—	Y	—	Y

Seeming Discrepancy of Genesis 1.29 vs. 2.16-17

1.29 "God said, 'See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food.'"

vs.

2.16-17 "And the Lord God commanded the man, '**You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat,** for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'"

Genesis 2.18-20: "It is not good that man should be alone"

2.18: Then the Lord God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper ('ezer*) as his partner;

2.19-20: "So out of the ground the Lord God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name. [2.20] The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper ('ezer) as his partner.

**note that 'ezer is used of God at Ex.18.4, Dt.33.7, Ps.33.20, 70.6, 115.9-11, 146.5*