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The All-Too-Human Gods

There is a lot of talk these days about dysfunctional families. These are families that simply don't work, that are troubled in one way or the other. They do more harm than good, we are told, and they are a blight on our time. From all the hype about families lately, one might think they are a fairly new thing.

But dysfunctional families have been around for a long time. In fact, in the days of ancient Greece and Rome, the universe itself was said to have been run by one of the most troubled families ever. The gods who lived on Mt. Olympus, that fabled peak in northern Greece, were a family counselor's worst nightmare.

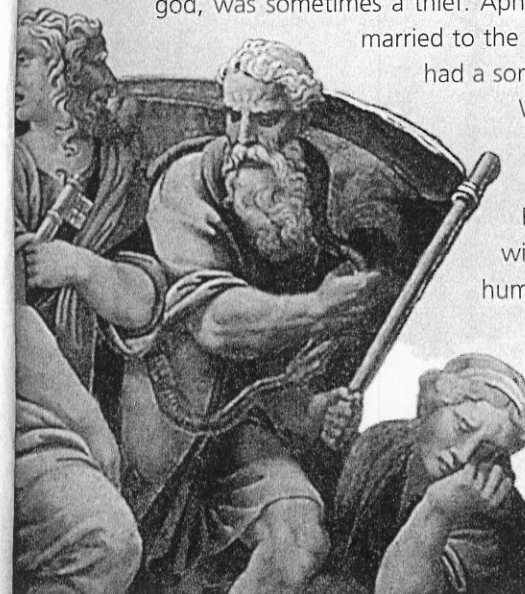
Consider Zeus, the god of lightning and the ruler of the heavens. He was the head of the family, and he ruled wisely in some matters. But he was also an unfaithful husband who fathered numerous children by women he never married—and sometimes never saw again.

His wife, Hera (who was also his sister, by the way), was understandably jealous. No one can blame her for punishing her husband whenever she could. Unfortunately, she was also cruel to his unwitting mortal lovers. And she made life miserable for those children, including the hero Hercules and the vine god Dionysus.

Few of the other gods were models of good behavior. Hermes, the messenger god, was sometimes a thief. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, was unhappily married to the lame god of the forge, Hephaestus. So she had a sordid fling with Ares, the god of war.

When Hades, the ruler of the dead, decided to take a wife, he seized the young goddess Persephone by force. The grief of Persephone's mother, Demeter, brought winter to the world and almost destroyed humankind.

Indeed, trouble often came to men and women when the gods misbehaved. Like Zeus, the god Apollo sometimes ruined the lives of mortal lovers. And when a



THE BATTLE OF THE GIANTS
Giulio Romano

hunter accidentally saw the goddess Artemis bathing, she had him torn to pieces by his own dogs. Likewise, when gods like Athena and Poseidon were unhappy, war and destruction actually broke out in the world.

The only Olympian deity who did no harm was Hestia, the kindly goddess of the hearth. Is it any surprise that there are no interesting stories told about her?

And what of the people who worshipped these troublesome gods? Interestingly, both the ancient Greeks and Romans rose to great heights of civilization and culture.

During the fifth century B.C., the city of Athens became the most powerful city-state in Greece. It achieved great things in sculpture, architecture, drama, and philosophy. It even produced the world's first experiment in democratic government.

Today, this "Golden Age" of Athens is regarded as one of the high points of civilization. And yet Athens' citizens never gave up their reverence for the often ill-behaved Olympian gods.

Eventually, Rome replaced Greece as the center of civilization. Not the most original people in the world, the Romans adopted the Olympian gods as their own. They did, however, change most of the deities' names. For

example, Zeus became Jove, and Hera became Juno. In this book, you may notice inconsistencies in the spelling of names and even in facts from tale to tale. This is the result of many tellers telling many tales over many years.

By 27 B.C., the Romans ruled the greatest empire in the ancient world. During the following two centuries, the world was largely without war. This era was known as the *Pax Romana*, or "Roman Peace." The cultural achievements of Rome came to rival those of Athens. And yet, like the Greeks before them, the Romans honored the unruly Olympians.

What all these great civilizations had in common is that they revered what we would now call a dysfunctional family. Why? Perhaps they saw something of their own faults and frailties in the Olympian deities. For even at their heights, the Greek and Roman civilizations were far from perfect. The Athenian Golden Age was marred by frequent wars, and the *Pax Romana* was an age of dictatorial emperors. Moreover, both Greeks and Romans kept slaves and treated women poorly.

For all their greatness, the Greeks and Romans may have learned humility from their gods. And although we no longer believe in the Olympians today, perhaps they can teach us a similar lesson. We are, after all, only human—much like the gods themselves.

