

# Exploring the history and the many facets of God



## Highland Views

Chris Highland  
Guest columnist

I was raised on God. That sounds rather strange to say, but from early years I heard stories of one particular God who some call “The God of the Bible.” This Father in Heaven loved me, gave me a loving family, watched over me, and listened to my nightly prayers, ready to “take my soul” in sleep, if “I should die before I wake.”

A God to worship; a God to fear. Great love; great power. As I learned more and more about Him (He, of course, was male), my understanding expanded to the edges of my Christian upbringing. God was greater, bigger, more encompassing than I once thought. God was far greater than any book, any scripture, any church, any religion. I grew up with this God, and then, in a sense, this God grew up with me. He became more personal, like a Friend rather than a Father, and more feminine, Motherly.

As I came to “know God” better in college, seminary and ministry, I became more troubled by what I heard, read and witnessed in the One Faith taught to me since childhood. The biblical deity was

both kind and cruel, creator and destroyer, lover and punisher. How could the God of Love do such terrible things? From Genesis to Revelation, the Almighty set up an impossible situation for humans.

He places a forbidden tree of knowledge in a garden paradise to tempt his children, luring them with a creature He created; He wipes out every living thing except what Noah could fit on his boat; He orders Abraham to kill Isaac but calls it off, after terrorizing the boy; He sends Moses to free a group of slaves only to leave them in the desert for 40 years; He drops down hundreds of commands, many including animal sacrifice ... and many more stories of a “vengeful but merciful” God. The compassionate nature of gentle Jesus seemed such a relief! But then, he had to be a bloody sacrifice to appease his Father’s anger too. I outgrew God in favor of Jesus, then found I needed to leave the Jesus part of the story behind as well. The Jesus of the Sermon on the Mount was someone I could walk beside. Yet, the Jesus of Judgment Day was a disappointing return to the angry and fearfully capricious Creator.

I’ve been listening to a fascinating podcast on the Greek pantheon. “The Ancients” series begins with “Zeus: King of the Gods,” and covers Hera, He-

phaestus, Aphrodite, Ares, Athena, Apollo, Poseidon, Hades, Demeter, Hermes and more. I’ve been interested in the history of gods for a long time, so the mythology of the Greeks draws my attention to the human need to create divine figures to make sense of our world and the cosmos (We don’t speak of the “mythology” of the biblical God, because that makes him seem so common – one among many. Yet, the God of the Hebrews and Christians is indeed one among many – who jealously commands: “Thou shalt have no other gods besides Me”). The Gods of the Greeks were older than the God of the Bible, just as the Gods of the Hindus, Babylonians, Egyptians and many others were older. Once we learn about some of these, we find many parallels to the divinity presented in the Bible.

The deities on Mount Olympus could be very loving and compassionate, yet could be quite cruel. They were, at various times, “vengeful but merciful.” They demanded animal sacrifice, devotion and obedience, and sent people on journeys to test their faith. They took sides in battles (see the books of Kings, etc). They took human form (and the form of animals as well – think of descriptions of angelic beings in the Bible, as well as the “dove-like” Holy Spirit). They “intermingled” with humans (this occurs in

Genesis as well as the Nativity story) and divine children were born. The Greek Gods could go to the underworld, ruled by Hades, and return – resurrected – into the land of the living, and ascend back to the mountaintop (the biblical God often is encountered on mountains). Many common elements, as well as differences. Side by side, the Greek Gods have many similar qualities to the God of the Bible.

It was good to be reminded that Hephaestus, God of the Forge, lived with a disability, and was a master artisan. One scholar described him as a “Wounded Creator.” Enduring the ridicule of other gods, and the humiliation of Ares sleeping with his wife Aphrodite, Hephaestus was, in significant ways, not a minor deity. He forged the trident of Poseidon, the armor of Achilles, the thunderbolt of Zeus and the throne of Hera.

The history of gods is worth further exploration. We’ll certainly learn much more about ourselves.

*Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville, North Carolina. His books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” (chighland.com).*