

# Section 8 – Greek Mythology

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## Orpheus and Eurydice

The basic version of this story is well known and has been the foundation of many great works of art and literature. However, it is a deeply enigmatic tale.

Orpheus was a singer, player of the lyre and a prophet, whose ability as a musician could charm the gods themselves. He was one of the Argonauts, who accompanied Jason in his quest for the Golden Fleece, selected specifically to overcome the Sirens with his beautiful music. Eurydice was his bride, but on the eve of their wedding she was attacked by a satyr, who intended to rape her. Fleeing, she put her foot into a nest of vipers and was fatally bitten.

Orpheus, distraught, asked the deities what he should do. They advised him to descend into the Underworld, where his music would charm Hades and Persephone and cause them to release Eurydice. This he did, and Eurydice was indeed set free, but Orpheus had been warned that he must leave the Underworld before her and not look back until both had ascended into the World. Orpheus forgot this and as soon as he ascended into life he looked back. Eurydice was still in the Underworld and immediately vanished, to die forever.

When European cultures first rediscovered ancient Greek literature, during the Renaissance, no-one had any idea that Egyptian or Sumerian culture had even existed, and so for centuries this was the definitive tale of death and rebirth. Now, however, we can see the strong parallels between this myth and those of Inanna and Dumuzi, Ishtar and Tammuz and Aset/Isis and Osiris alongside many others. These other myths pre-date Orpheus by thousands of years.

All of these stories either have a common origin somewhere in a prior oral tradition that mythologised the seasons or they are directly descended from one another. The similarities between so many different tales from different regions and cultures make any other interpretation highly improbable. Because we can now place the appearance of these tales on a timeline, beginning in Sumer, we can see the differences among them as an evolution of the myth in response to changing socio-political conditions.<sup>1</sup>

Eurydice represents the Goddess. She is to be married, which is already established as a way to transfer her powers to a man. She is attacked by a satyr, a supernatural being, half man and half goat. It symbolised unrestrained sexuality and phallic power. The satyr may have its roots in

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<sup>1</sup> This process is known to mythologists as ‘syncretisation’.

animist cults of the hunt, but in this case it represents the power of male sexuality – expressed through the phallus – to overthrow the Goddess. It is rape personified.

A snake then bites Eurydice. Snakes can represent the Goddess, but the phallic shape of the snake is also frequently used to represent the male element. The context here suggests the latter interpretation. Thus, Eurydice is brought down three different ways: by marriage, which takes her powers, by rape, which degrades her, and by the snake, which kills her.

Eurydice is now helpless, imprisoned in the Underworld. Only Orpheus, a man, may help her. But Orpheus is not just any man, though neither is he a warrior in the conventional sense. He is a musician, a bard and a prophet. In other words, he is a priest. So this tale is saying that male priests may help the Goddess. She has lost all her powers, including that to control her descent and ascent and instead these have been transferred to a male. But here, the male is not another deity, but a human priest. The story may be interpreted, therefore, as a literary defence for a male priesthood not only taking to itself the powers of the Goddess, but also usurping and casting down the female priesthood which had previously served her.

This is a much darker interpretation of the myth than is often presented, but it fits neatly into the timeline of the development of the patriarchy. The details of this story can give us a guide to the nature of the culture that told it, and where that culture sits on the timeline as society moved from a matriarchy to a patriarchy. Compare this to the earlier myth of Inanna's descent. Eurydice is completely powerless to help herself, unlike Inanna, who had the whole thing planned in advance and remained in control throughout; this is a remarkable and telling shift.

Enki was the Sumerian god of wisdom and craft, and it is reasonable to suggest that he always represented a class of priests, initiated into their mysterious knowledge. Orpheus is clearly in the same role, able to use his special powers of music to charm the deities to do his will. In this sense, priests are shown as being more than mere interlocutors with the deities, but able to influence them. Orpheus, therefore, is Enki, or at least a later version of him. In Inanna's tale, the cycle is originally completely under the Goddess' control and then an element is introduced which references a new requirement for male aid. In Orpheus' tale this has gone much further, with the Goddess being completely powerless and totally dependent upon a man.

Why then does Orpheus fail while Enki succeeded? Partly, because Orpheus is human whereas Enki is a god. He may go far, and his powers may be great but the supernatural, the world of the deities, is more powerful. A mortal man may not stand against the hand of destiny, no matter how powerful a wizard he may be; only a deity may do that, and not always with impunity. More important, however, is the intent of the authors. In the Sumerian myth, the object was to see the goddess Inanna – the principal deity of the culture – restored, while in the Greek it was to see the Goddess cast down.

The importance of Greek mythology in helping to understand Western cultural development is immense. From Saul of Tarsus, later Paul the Apostle, onwards, the development of early Christianity was firmly under the guidance of people who had been brought up in Greek culture, with Greek myths. If it had not been made attractive to these Hellenised peoples, Christianity would probably have remained a little-known cult of the Eastern Mediterranean. The foundation of Greek culture in Goddess theology, albeit seen through patriarchal eyes, was imported into Christianity in order to maximise its popular appeal.