

What Greek gods are mentioned in the Bible?

Events in the New Testament play out against the backdrop of Greek and Roman culture, so it's not surprising that some of the gods of the Greeks and Romans are mentioned in the Bible. Five different Greek gods are mentioned by name, and there are several allusions to the names of other gods.

One of the Greek gods mentioned in the Bible is Hermes, whom the Romans called Mercury. Hermes acted as a messenger for the gods and was honored for his diplomacy, cleverness, and social skills. The Bible mentions Hermes in the account of Paul's first missionary journey. When Paul and Barnabas came to Lystra in Asia Minor, they healed a paralyzed man, an act that attracted the attention of the townspeople. "When the crowd saw what Paul had done, they shouted in the Lycaonian language, 'The gods have come down to us in human form!' . . . Paul they called Hermes because he was the chief speaker" (Acts 14:11-12). A priest arrived on the scene, bringing bulls and wreaths in order to offer sacrifices to Paul and Barnabas (verse 13).

Of course, the missionaries could not allow themselves to be honored as pagan gods, and they shouted, "Friends, why are you doing this? We too are only human, like you. We are bringing you good news, telling you to turn from these worthless things to the living God, who made the heavens and the earth and the sea and everything in them" (Acts 14:15). Eventually, Paul and Barnabas were able to cool the pagan fervor and with difficulty kept the crowd from sacrificing to them (verse 18).

On the same occasion, the Greek god Zeus (Jupiter to the Romans) is also mentioned. As the people of Lystra were honoring Paul as Hermes, "Barnabas they called Zeus" (Acts 14:12), believing him to be an incarnation of the chief god. Zeus was the god of

lightning, thunder, rain, and the heavens, and he ruled over the other gods. Lystra had a temple to Zeus just outside the city (verse 13).

Two other Greek gods are mentioned in the context of Paul's journey to Rome. The apostle Paul had been arrested and was under guard in transit to Rome across the Mediterranean Sea. After a stay in Malta, Paul was put on "a ship that had wintered in the island—it was an Alexandrian ship with the figurehead of the twin gods Castor and Pollux" (Acts 28:11). Castor and Pollux were twin brothers (although they somehow had different fathers). They were thought to bring good luck and protection for sailors and were associated with the phenomenon known as St. Elmo's fire. Today, these twin gods of ancient myth are often called the Gemini.

The goddess mentioned in Acts 19 is called Artemis of the Ephesians. The Greek goddess Artemis (Diana to the Romans) was the goddess of the moon and hunting. The goddess worshiped in Ephesus as "Artemis" seems to have been a local deity, distinct from the Greek moon goddess with whom she shared a name.

We will mention here that the Bible also uses the words *thanatos* ("death") in John 8:52, *hades* ("place of the dead") in Luke 10:15, and a cognate of *tartarus* ("hell") in 2 Peter 2:4. In Greek mythology, *Thanatos*, *Hades*, and *Tartarus* are all gods associated with death and the underworld, but the Bible uses the words in a different context without sanctioning the idea that they are gods.

Another Greek goddess is mentioned in the Bible, albeit indirectly. *Aphrodite* was the Greek goddess of love, beauty, and sensuality. The Romans called her *Venus*. *Aphrodite* is not explicitly named in the Bible, but she still shows up in the name of *Epaphroditus*,

who was a “brother, co-worker and fellow soldier” of Paul (Philippians 2:25). The name Ephaphroditus means “belonging to Aphrodite”—the name of the goddess is actually incorporated into his name.

The Greek gods, with all their convoluted mythology and popular stories, are really nothing more than demons that people through history have chosen to worship: “The things which the Gentiles sacrifice they sacrifice to demons and not to God” (1 Corinthians 10:20). But such is the power of the gospel that we can be set free from dead paganism to serve the living God. When Epaphroditus received the gospel, he was no longer “belonging to Aphrodite”; he was “belonging to Jesus,” and the false god had no more claim on him. The new birth trumped the birth name.