

*Charis* Before Christ:  
a Discussion of Grace in Ancient Greek Literature

Alyson Melzer  
Stanford: Passion Talks, 2015

χάρις

*charis*: grace

For by *charis* you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God. Ephesians 2:8

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory... full of *charis* and truth.

And from his fullness we have all received *charis* upon *charis*.  
John 1:14 and 16

... but where sin increased, *charis* abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, *charis* also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. Romans 5:20-21

# The Charites



From Botticelli's *Primavera*

ξενία

*xenia*: hospitality



*The Odyssey*  
8<sup>th</sup> century BCE



## *Odyssey* 6.229 - 37

“Athena, daughter of Zeus, made [Odysseus] seem taller for the eye to behold, and greater... And just as when a master craftsman overlays gold on silver, completing pieces full of *charis*, so too did Athena gild *charis* over Odysseus’ head and his shoulders. He then went and sat by himself on the seashore, radiant in beauty and *charis*.”

*The Iliad*  
8<sup>th</sup> century BCE





*Iliad* 9.316 – 17

“... since there was no *charis* given for fighting incessantly forever against your enemies.”

“*Charis* is one of the major evidences of this need for co-operation in order to secure the survival of the individual.”

Mary Scott, “*Charis* in Homer”

“*Charis* removes the natural barriers that separate people... [it] induces a social softening between strangers, friends, lovers, mortals, and gods. This experience, profoundly social, one of the best experiences known to humankind, is pleasurable.”

Bonnie MacLachlan, *The Age of Grace*

*The Ajax*, by Sophocles  
mid 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE





*Ajax* line 1354

“Remember what sort of man  
he was, this man to whom you  
are now giving *charis*.”

## Romans 6:14

“Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under *charis*.”

1 Peter 4:10

“As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied *charis*.”

# Works Cited

Low, Otto. “*X A P / Σ*” Diss. Marburg (1908).

MacLachlan, Bonnie. *The Age of Grace: Charis in Early Greek Poetry*.  
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Morris, Ian. “The Use and Abuse of Homer.” *Classical Antiquity* 5.1  
(1986): 81-138.

Scott, Mary. “*Charis* in Homer and the Homeric Hymns.” *ACTA  
Classica* XXVI (1983): 1-13.

Sorum, Christina Elliot. “Sophocles’ *Ajax* in Context.” *The Classical  
World* 79.6 (1986): 361-77.

Vernant, Jean-Pierre. “Semblances of Pandora: Imitation and  
Identity.” translated by Froma Zeitlin. *Critical Inquiry* 37.3  
(2011): 404-418.