A Look at the Similarities between Greek Mythology and Early Christianity

Mandi Andersen

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Dr. James Munson

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According to John Richard Thornhill Pollard, Greek mythology is a “body of stories concerning the gods, heroes, and rituals of the ancient Greeks.”[[1]](#endnote-1) The early day Christian religion is defined by Britannica stating, “Christianity [is a] major religion stemming from the life, teachings, and death of Jesus of Nazareth (the Christ, or the Anointed One of God) in the 1st century CE.”[[2]](#endnote-2) The core of Greek mythology and the early religion of Christianity contain many similarities, such as what they believed in, how they each integrated religion into their daily lives, and the figures they admired.

The Greeks and Christians both had beliefs that were practiced during their lifetimes. The Greeks often told stories and acted out plays based on Greek mythology and how they believed that the Gods are real. For example, one of the goals of ancient Greeks was to achieve divinity. To achieve divinity, one must encompass power, excellence, and immortality. Many athletes strived to be like demi-gods through their sports. Lunt states, “…the historical athletes had consciously attempted to imitate the actions and adventures of mythic heroes in order to claim a similar heroic status.”[[3]](#endnote-3) Here, Lunt is saying that athletes copied mythic heroes, the demi-gods, because they wanted to become heroes too. The people of Greece believed this story and many stories about Greek gods which are similar. They didn’t question if Greek plays were a story, but they questioned if the story of the gods were actually real. Similarly, Christians are guided by the Bible. Henry Chadwick summarized the ideals well when he said, “They believed that in [Jesus’] teaching and life, God had ‘visited his people’ and sent a prophet and more than a prophet an example and teacher of the way of truth and righteousness…”[[4]](#endnote-4) Just like Greek mythology, the Bible contains characters that tell stories about their lives. One example is in the story of Ruth, recounted by the editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, when they say, “The Book of Ruth relates that Ruth and Orpah, two women of Moab, had married two sons of Elimelech and Naomi, Judeans who had settled in Moab to escape a famine in Judah. The husbands of all three women die; Naomi plans to return to her native Bethlehem and urges her daughters-in-law to return to their families. Orpah does so, but Ruth refuses to leave Naomi, declaring (Ruth 1:16-17), “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die – there will I be buried.” Ruth accompanies Naomi to Bethlehem and later marries Boaz, a distant relative of her late father-in-law. She is a symbol of abiding loyalty and devotion.”[[5]](#endnote-5) This is an example of Christians that look to the Bible for guidance. The story demonstrated to Christians that they should be loyal and devoted to their loved ones during their lifetime because that is what Ruth did in the Bible and Christians base their morals on the Bible.

Both the Greeks and early Christians had figures in which they admired. One individual who was important to the Greeks was Achilles. Originally, he was not going to participate in the Trojan War because his mother did not want him to, because she knew he was going to die. This is described when Thury and Devinney state, “His mother Thetis knew of a prophecy saying that if her son went to Troy, he would die there. He would either have a short and glorious life, or a long and ordinary one. Thetis hid her son on an island and disguised himself as a girl.”[[6]](#endnote-6) At this point in time, it does not look like Achilles is going to be a hero at all, but that is proven wrong when Odysseus finds Achilles and convinces him to come on the expedition. Throughout the war, Achilles mom is very worried and tries to make sure he is safe the whole time. One of the most famous actions she takes is hiring a blacksmith to make Achilles special protection to wear during fighting. Achilles is admired because he was well known and a great fighter, most likely because he was trained by Odysseus. The reading states, “The greatest warrior among the Greek leaders was Achilles” and “he died, as the prophecy promised, gloriously.” [[7]](#endnote-7) The Christians had people that they look to as well. One example is Constantine, who was a Christian ruler, believed in God and Christ. Constantine set a great example of how a Christian should act. For example, he was baptized as he was dying. Another action that showed how much Constantine loved Christianity was that he built seven churches around Rome, and supported even more financially. Wolf talks about how Constantine worshipped Christ by saying, “Constantine, like any fourth-century Roman ruler, worshipped his God, as one historian put it, ‘on his own terms.’[[8]](#endnote-8) Constantine’s religious convictions were his own, but they were sincere…”[[9]](#endnote-9) The reading then goes on to explain that Constantine exempted some members of the clergy and churches from paying taxes. He also required that courts and work places be closed on Sunday, a practice that is still followed in some places today. As seen, Constantine was passionate about his faith and belief in Christ. His actions show that following Christianity was a main part of his life, and Christians today can admire Constantine’s love of Christianity.

Through similar beliefs, integrating religion into daily lives, and the figures they admired, we can see that Greek mythology and the early religion of Christianity have many similarities. We see that both the Greeks and the Christians have driving forces that guide the religion, and there are people in each time period that display what it is looks like to be a role model.

1. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., s.v. “Greek Mythology.” [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., s.v. “Christianity.” [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. David J. Lunt, *The Heroic Athlete in Ancient Greece* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2009), 377. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Henry Chadwick, *The Early Christian Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., s.v. “Ruth.” [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Eva M. Thury and Margaret K. Devinney, *What is myth?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Eva M. Thury and Margaret K. Devinney, *What is myth?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. MacMullen, *Constantine*, 113. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Ken Wolf, *Personalities and Problems* (New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc.), 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)