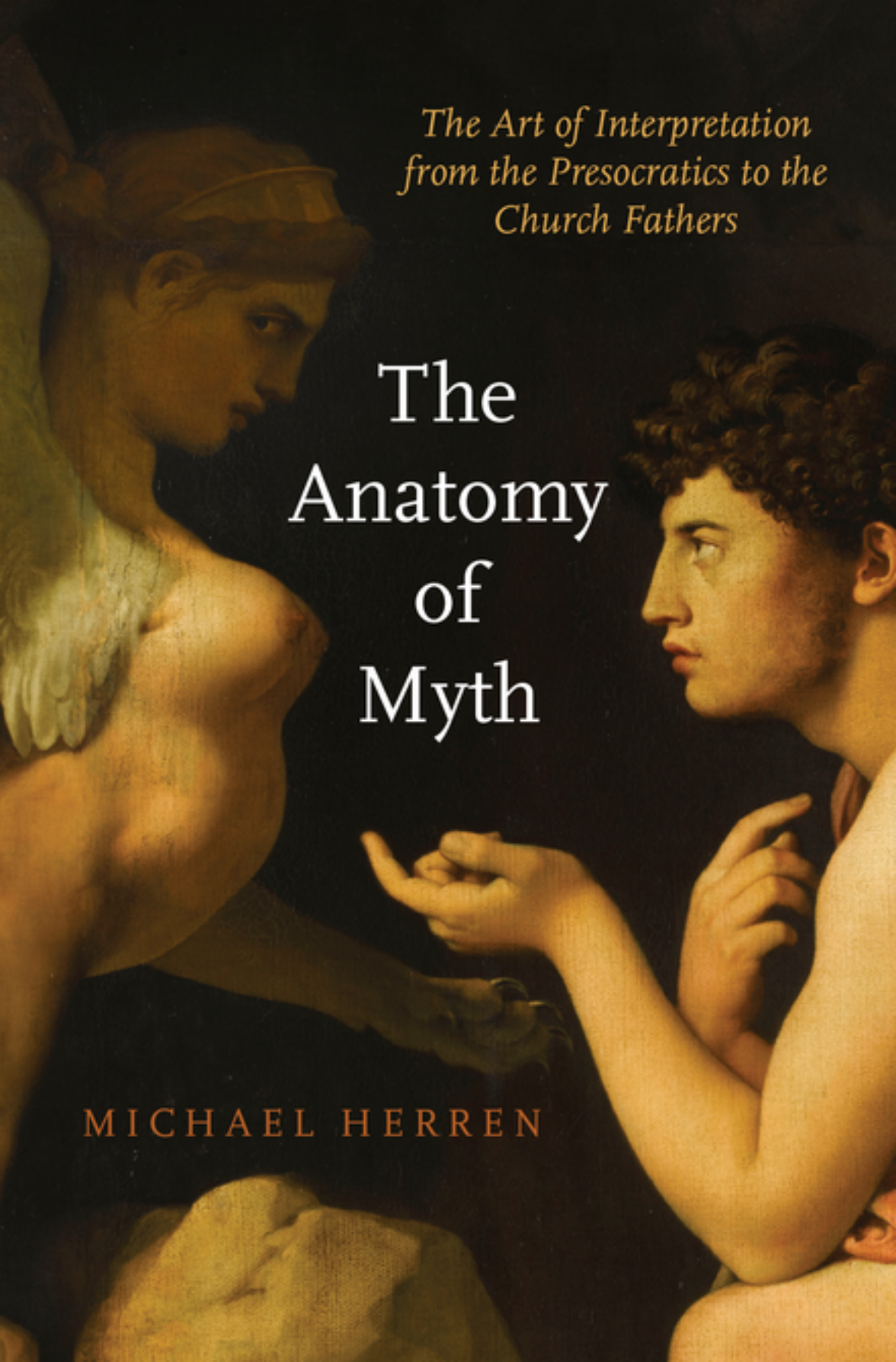
The Art of Interpretation from the Presocratics to the Church Fathers
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Preface

This is a book for students. By students I mean anyone interested in learning how ancient ideas influence modern thought and modern ways of being. My book, though written for students, is not a textbook; that is, it is not a simple summary of the main lines of myth interpretation as explained by previous scholars. Rather, it is a fresh attempt to look at the methods of interpreting the myths contained in ancient authoritative texts in the context of the history of ideas. I attempt to weave the strands of myth interpretation with those of shifting paradigms in ancient thought and culture, particularly as they relate to ideas about god, nature, the origins of the cosmos, and the fate of the soul. I also relate developments in interpretative methods to issues such as literacy, authority, the agenda of the philosophical schools, and attitudes to poetry. I touch on the large questions of freedom of expression, the effect of myth criticism on religious belief and social cohesion, and the impact of critical interpretations developed by pagans on the understanding of Jewish and Christian scriptures.

The notion of a "paradigm" requires an explanation. By "paradigm" I mean the bundle of ideas prevailing at a given time that encompass the divine, its relation to nature, the origins of the world and humans, the beginnings of society, and the concept of the good life. Such ideas can be documented for any literate age. But one must keep in mind that they are the creations of elites; they cannot be taken as evidence for the universal beliefs of a given society. The most influential teachings prevailing in our own society might be captured by words and phrases such as evolutionism, secularism ("humanism"), religious and philosophical skepticism, individualism (anti-authoritarianism),

and faith in progress through science—to name some. Such notions form the assumptions and working hypotheses of pundits and public intellectuals, and are disseminated in popular books, print journalism, television, blogs, and social media. They are not accepted by everyone, and eventually invite a backlash that leads to culture wars and a new paradigm.

For the ancient world I have hypothesized three paradigms that correspond roughly to three eras: (1) the Paradigm of the Poets (ca. 800–600 B.C.E.), (2) the Paradigm of *Physis* (Nature, ca. 600–350 B.C.E.), and (3) the Paradigm of *Theos* (god, 350 B.C.E. onward). Each was succeeded in turn when its ideas were perceived as exhausted or inadequate. Myth and poetry gave way to natural philosophy, which in turn was undermined by the criticism that it did not adequately explain causation or account for god. The theism that replaced it, however, did not sweep away everything with it. The critical spirit, the Greek idea of *historia* ("investigation," "inquiry"), survived and endured even through "the triumph" of Christianity. Remarkably, the greatest debt to ancient Greek thought incurred by Christianity was not a particular philosophical doctrine, but the habit of reading its scriptures critically—much as a pagan Greek might read Homer.

This book entertains a thesis: the exposure of the most authoritative works of the ancient Greeks to public criticism and discussion was a decisive step toward creating the open, pluralistic society that we in the Western nations enjoy today. I do not mean to over-spin this. The speculative thinkers of the sixth and fifth century B.C.E. were not proto-secularists, or precursors of today's "humanists." Very few of them engaged in open assaults on religion, even in times when it was safe to do so. With few exceptions, they did not attempt to rid their world of gods, but rather to make the gods better, more worthy of emulation. Their idea of a rational cosmos included the divine, but it opened the debate over what the nature of the gods really was and what their role in the operation of the universe may have been. Whatever their opinions on these momentous questions, the early Greeks agreed on one issue: it was just fine to disbelieve myths, and to criticize portions of what the ancient poets Homer and Hesiod had to say about the gods. The poets may have been inspired in some way, but that was no guarantee against misrepresentation of the divine.

The image invoked by the title word *Anatomy* refers to the cutting up (Greek *ana-tomē*) of the body (that is, the literal meaning) of a myth to see what lies inside. We can imagine—in good Roman fashion—that a reading of the entrails is to follow. And like all such efforts in divination, interpretations varied. Because myths were often coupled with poems, the anatomy of a myth became closely linked to the dissecting of words (especially names) in the poems that contained them. I trace the main lines of these different anatomies, insofar as they can be documented. I emphasize the importance of "public interpretation," as I focus on the origin and growth of the open criticism of

myth and poetry and attempts to interpret them in published form. The advent of literacy brought with it the possibility of publication. For the ancient Greeks, any book in the public domain, regardless of topic, was open to discussion and criticism, even scorn when warranted. Freedom of expression was abetted by freedom of movement also, as early Greek thinkers moved from place to place and brought their books with them. There were indeed attempts at repression, but these were localized, sporadic, and in the long run unsuccessful.

I have designed my book as a narrative. There is a story to be told, and stories involve advances and reversals, vicissitudes and progress. They do not always end happily; this one does not end unhappily. I am naive enough to believe that the appropriation of pagan Greek methods of critiquing ancient myths by Jewish and Christian interpreters of the scriptures had a long-term beneficial effect on later readers of religious books. However, the frame of my story will be limited to an initial impulse from Jewish scholars to adopt the tools of pagan Greek myth criticism, followed by their appropriation by the Greek Christian Fathers. The methods established by the pagan Greeks and adapted by Jewish and Christian scholars passed into the Western Middle Ages and the Renaissance, when they were once again applied, with some variations, for interpreting the pagan classics. "Classical exegesis" (my term for the bundle of ancient interpretative methods) served first to hedge the scriptures against fundamentalism, then to preserve the pagan classics against assaults by zealous Christians.[1]

The historical era covered, as the subtitle suggests, is the entire ancient world. I begin with Homer and end, in the Greek domain, with the Neoplatonist Proclus, who died in 485; in the Latin world I stop at Augustine, who died in 430. The geographical confines are, unsurprisingly, set in cities around the Mediterranean. I start in Ionia (western coastal Turkey), and proceed to South Italy, Athens, Rome, Alexandria, Carthage, and back to Athens. While one can mark certain turning points where paradigms shift, the reader is cautioned against expecting absolute breaks between one paradigm and another. There is evidence of scientific thinking in the early poets, theistic dogmatism among the natural philosophers (the Presocratics), and continuity of scientific thought in the period when theism is predominant.

Although the present book has been gestating for about two decades, I felt some urgency to complete and publish it in the light of the events in Paris in 2015. I believe the pundits are correct about one thing at least: although the series of attacks differed in outcome, their purpose was the same. They were all assaults on freedom. I do not leap from that assertion to an indictment of Islam or religion in general. But I do fear that there is a link between irrational acts of cruelty and misguided understandings of religious texts. In that light, I believe that the ancient Greeks have something of benefit to offer today's world. Their methods of interpreting their authoritative poets may strike modern literary scholars as primitive or naive, but they were infused with a healthy

skepticism, a refusal to believe what appeared irrational, or accept myths at face value.

The idea for this book springs, first and foremost, from my years of teaching courses on the ancient humanities at York University and graduate seminars on the classical tradition and the Latin Bible at the University of Toronto. Several of these courses are directly related to the interpretation of myth: "Myths and Their Meanings," "Greek Mythology," and "Texts and Interpretation." Matters related to the interpretation of authoritative books also arise in the seminar I regularly teach on St. Augustine. By teaching the survey course "Myths and Their Meanings," I became acquainted with the methods developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for dealing with myths cross-culturally and the various modern schools of myth interpretation—the "myth and ritual school," structuralism, functionalism (based on historical linguistics), and the different psychoanalytical approaches.

Perhaps one of the most surprising features of this book is that it is short, containing chapters of moderate length. I had a great deal more documentary evidence at my disposal than I use here, but many passages illustrate the same exegetical points. And so, rather than write a 600-page book that people might use for reference, but not really read, it seemed wiser to write a shorter book that could be read and absorbed in a few sittings. The strategy of brevity also serves the pedagogical aims of the book, one with chapters of manageable length that can be used in conjunction with primary sources in a college or university setting. A short book also supports the aim of presenting a thesis. The development of a variety of interpretative methods is a worthy subject, but I would not want this to obscure the central point that it is the activity of interpreting authoritative texts, and the freedom to do so, that has helped create the society that we currently enjoy. Thus, I draw upon the Greek poet Callimachus: a small book is a great virtue.

My research has been generously supported at various stages by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Killam Foundation, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the Alexander-von-Humboldt Stiftung. I am especially grateful to the Alexander-von-Humboldt-Stiftung for a research prize in 2004 that enabled me to investigate a large number of manuscripts in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich. The many hours needed to collect the large number of slips containing excerpts from Greek and Latin texts relative to myth interpretation were afforded me by the Killam Foundation of the Canada Council, which awarded me a Killam Fellowship (1996–1998) and by a Guggenheim Fellowship (1998–1999). As freedom is one of the *leitmotifs* of my work, I express my gratitude to York University, and especially to Atkinson College, for the freedom it gave me to teach what I saw fit, and to take leaves when I needed them to pursue my research. I would like to thank my longtime colleague and friend Ross Arthur for reading the manuscript and suggesting a publisher; Florence

Silver for decades-long encouragement to write a book on Greek myth; John Magee, Brad Inwood, and Brian Stock for stimulating and helpful discussion; the readers for Oxford University Press for their very helpful reports preventing error and initiating improvement; executive editor Stefan Vranka for his faith in this project; and, most of all, my wife, art historian Shirley Ann Brown, for many wise suggestions over the course of preparing and revising this book, and for meticulous editing and proofreading of the final draft.

Abbreviations

For full bibliographical information consult the Bibliography.

Deut.	(Bible) Deuteronomy
DK	Diels, Hermann and Walter Kranz, eds., *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*
Epid.	(Cornutus) *Epidrome*
FGrH	F. Jacoby, ed., *Die Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*
Gen. (Bible)	Genesis
H.P.	(Heraclitus the Younger) *Homeric Problems*
Il.	(Homer) *Iliad*
KRS	G. S. Kirk, J. E. Raven, and M. Schofield, *The Presocratic Philosophers*
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
Lev.	(Bible) Leviticus
Meta.	(Aristotle) *Metaphysics*
N.E.	(Aristotle) *Nicomachean Ethics*
Od.	(Homer) *Odyssey*
Phys.	(Aristotle) *Physics*
Rep.	(Plato) *Republic*
SVF	H. von Arnim, ed., *Stoicorum veterum fragmenta*
Theog.	(Hesiod) Theogony
Tim.	(Plato) *Timaeus*

The Anatomy of Myth

Introduction

"The Greeks' most important legacy is not, as we would like to think, democracy; it is their *mythology*." So begins Mary Lefkowitz's Book, *Women in Greek Myth*.[1] The statement rings true. Certainly, when we think of the ancient Greeks, we think first of their gods and heroes. Their statues abound in museums, and kitschy plaster copies of them can still be found in people's houses and gardens. Movies and animated cartoons about Hercules or Perseus are regularly released, while novelists and short story writers continue to probe the ancient stories for their insights into the human condition. Some of the very great stories, for example, the tale of Odysseus (Roman Ulysses), cross artistic boundaries. Ulysses' tale provided the impetus for one of the first operas, Claudio Monteverdi's *Return of Ulysses*, and also for one of the masterpieces of the twentieth-century novel, James Joyce's *Ulysses*.[2] Like the *daimōn* Proteus, myths are plastic: they can assume almost any shape at will. And like Proteus, they can't be wrestled down. They will wriggle out of any straitjacket you contrive in order to assume some new form. Myths shape-shift into paintings on vases, morph into poems, then take musical form as Pan plies the pipes.

If this does not convince one of the enduring power of Greek and Roman myths, consider their influence on our language. Our astral bodies from Mercury to Pluto are named after the Greek gods dressed in Roman garb; the names have not changed in more than two millennia. The names of several months—March from Mars, May from Maia, and June from Juno—reveal Roman or Greek origins. The French tried to change the month names during the Revolution and for a time under Napoleon, but to no avail. The Romance languages, for example, French, retained the names of the Roman gods for the last four weekdays: *mardi* (Mars), *mercredi* (Mercury), *jeudi* (Jupiter), and *vendredi* (Venus), while in English Saturday (< Saturn) displaced the Sabbath (*samedi, sabbato*), leaving Sun and Moon as common ground. However, the planets and the times they generate are not the end of the matter. Consider our psychological states: jovial ("cheerful, merry"), saturnine ("gloomy"), and

mercurial ("volatile"), the last named after an element, which in turn got its name from the god. The heroes come into it as well. A hard job is a Herculean task, while a fatal flaw is an Achilles heel. All of these names and expressions are hard wired. They are not going to be replaced any time soon.

Myths take hold of the minds of young people in a way that ordinary history cannot. Alexander the Great, who was deservedly famous for what he did, became even more famous for what he didn't do, which was to travel in a submarine, sail into the frozen sea, and fly. (These events are recorded in the pseudo-histories that grew up after his lifetime.[3]) Such extraordinary feats are the stuff of younger children's fantasies. They incite young imaginations to dream about the possibilities of human life. At a later stage, tales such as Perseus and Medusa, Odysseus and the Cyclops, and Theseus and the Minotaur enthrall children's minds with their focus on bravery and cunning. Later still, teenagers coming to grips with their own identity are attracted to darker stories such as Oedipus's quest for his beginnings, or to the mystery of the Golden Bough that gained Aeneas entry to the underworld and the enlightenment that resulted from his journey.

These and similar stories continue to play an important role in our current pedagogy. They are valued not so much because they come from great works of literature as because they are great stories. They excite the imagination as they teach. They function well in the educational systems of our multicultural Western societies because they transcend particular cultures and value systems. Because the cults to which the Greek gods and heroes were attached are long dead, their stories rarely give offence. It is little wonder, then, that children who have never heard of Noah or his ark can tell you all about Jason and the Argonauts.

What differentiates the Greeks from other earlier civilizations is that they not only gave us their wonderful narratives, but they also provided the elementary tools for interpreting them. We know that other civilizations, many of them much older than the Greek, produced rich mythologies. Think of the Hindus, the Sumerians and Akkadians, and the Egyptians, to name only some. But their stories were left to speak for themselves—or at least we have no evidence to the contrary. If their tales were simply about heroic feats or the love affairs of human beings, one might reasonably say that nothing more is needed. But myths are often much more complex, as they introduce different types of divine beings (e.g., gods, *daimones*, nature spirits) and describe the interactions between these beings and humans. Moreover, myths are often grouped into larger constellations that begin with the origin of the cosmos, the creation of men and women, and descriptions of an earlier age when things could happen that cannot happen now. For us, such claims immediately raise problems of belief. For adults of our time, a horse named Pegasus was no more able to fly than Santa's reindeer. Both are fables fit for young children; they are the stuff of the nursery.

Our earliest records of disbelief in hallowed stories come from the sixth century B.C.E. There were two basic critiques of the stories: (1) Many of them were unbelievable for rational human beings. (2) The traditional tales misrepresent the true nature of the gods, as they depict them committing theft and adultery and all manner of deception; they also show them shifting shapes and performing deeds contrary to their natures. On the one hand, we see skeptical minds that are struck by the disconnect between a transmitted story and one's knowledge, based on human experience, of what is possible. On the other, we see developing a new concept of what a god should be. Far from shunting the gods aside, the earliest Greek critics of myths sought to incorporate the gods into a new paradigm: one that allowed for the operation of the divine, but within the constraints of reason and the laws of nature. For the pioneers of interpretation, myths were false stories about the gods and heroes.

When we think of myths today, if we think of them as anything other than fairy tales, fictions, or propaganda, we imagine them as stories that originated in the distant past—a phenomenon beyond the reach of historians. Most of us do not think of them as coming from specific writers. Poetry and literature have authors; myth comes from somewhere else. Myths may belong to racial memory, or may embody some universal truth. We know, for example, that a primeval flood myth is not unique to the Book of Genesis. There is a flood story that comes from Sumeria, is repeated in Akkadian literature, and is later adapted by the compilers of Genesis. The Greeks also have a flood story that Ovid recounts as the tale of Deucalion and Pyrrha.[4] It is perhaps not surprising that these geographically connected cultures have a common account of a cataclysm that preceded history. It is more surprising that similar tales arise in North and South American mythology. One might explain all this as caused by the common experience of mankind distributed throughout the continents. The stories might have arisen from the destruction caused at the end of the Ice Age when the glaciers covering much of the earth's surface began to melt. But there are other modern explanations. Tales of a destructive catastrophe brought on by flooding could be rooted in a nightmare of the collective unconscious.

Modern theories of the origins of myth appear to have originated in the age of exploration. Christian missionaries of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, hoping to convert the "primitive peoples" whom their political masters were colonizing, began to collect and translate their stories. Classically educated scholars quickly realized that a number of these "primitive tales" bore an uncanny resemblance to the Greek and Roman myths with which they were acquainted.[5] From the German Romantics of the nineteenth century came the insight that myth must be taken on its own terms and understood for its unbreakable bond with the development of the human spirit.[6] Meanwhile, the idea of the connectedness of myth across cultures grew alongside the

development of the new science of anthropology, which focused on the nexus between primitive religion (ritual) and myth.[7]

In contrast to modern thinking about myth, most ancient Greek interpreters associated myths with the poems that contained them. Myth making was the business of poets. Homer and Hesiod, the earliest Greek poets whose works have survived, were widely regarded as the authors of the stories. Accordingly, they were blamed for deception—foisting lies on unsuspecting youth—or praised for their wisdom. With some important exceptions, the Greeks saw poets as the inventors of myth. At the start, the Greeks did not possess the advantage we have of being able to gather myths from different cultures and different ages and compare them. Had they been able to do this, they would have realized that their own stories had much in common with stories from neighboring cultures that were older than their own. Although willing to attribute much of their wisdom to the Egyptians, the Greeks never had an inkling that many of their myths were derived from the Middle East and the Levant.[8] We today see poets as shapers of stories that already existed, and think of myths as having a life of their own. This was not the mainstream view in ancient Greece. Poems and myths were inseparable; myths are false stories; therefore, poets are liars. Solon, the famous lawgiver of Athens, was, I believe, the first to make the accusation in the early sixth century B.C.E.

That poets were the inventors of myths and that they were liars were the dominant views of the Greeks, not only at the beginning, but well into late antiquity (down to the sixth century C.E.). However, alternative views were advanced against both. Regarding the origins of myths, two very different ideas came on stream. The earlier one came from the sophists of the later fifth century B.C.E. Some believed that the earliest men lived under terrible conditions, in constant need of food and shelter and protection against those who were stronger. They argued that myth making reflected this primitive state—an idea that is strikingly akin to modern anthropological theories as well as to Thomas Hobbes's view of man's early life as "nasty, brutish, and short." Stories about the gods arose collectively through fear or superstition, or from need, or else were invented by early lawgivers in order to limit the excess of the strong. In that view, the poets might be regarded as transmitters, rather than inventors, of myths. Whether one belonged to the "enemies of poetry" group, or to the more modern-seeming social theorists, the conclusion about myths was the same: they could not be taken literally.

An alternative view, developed in the fourth century B.C.E., also relates the origin of myths to the origin of mankind. Against the idea that human life advanced from misery to a more prosperous condition, it claimed that the opposite was true. Ironically, it relied on a myth as its basis. The poet Hesiod had depicted three quite different conditions of human life deriving from the myth of initial blessedness: (1) in a "Golden Age" as Zeus's first humans; (2) under the benign rule of Zeus's father, Kronos; or (3) initially

in close contact with the gods prior to an unfortunate rupture. Related to this original happiness is the concept of original wisdom. In the beginning the gods revealed an ancient wisdom containing truths about the cosmos and the nature of the divine. This truth was wrapped in myths. As the myths were passed down through the generations they were corrupted. The main agents of this corruption were the poets who distorted the divine truths by inventing fictions about the gods and their actions. The poets still bore responsibility in the process of myth making, but their contribution was baneful. It was the job of the philosophers to see through their distortions and reconstruct the ancient wisdom.[9]

Around the same time as the above theory was being developed, a radical thesis claiming that the gods were originally men who had done great deeds to benefit their communities was advanced in a fictional travel account called *Sacred Scripture*. Its author was a certain Euhemerus, about whom little is known. Euhemerus claimed that he learned on his voyage that the gods were only men who were worshipped as gods after their death. He reported that the deeds of Ouranos, Kronos, and Zeus were inscribed on a golden column. Accordingly, myths are stories that arise from the cult of heroes.

Finally, there is the theory that the ancient poets, not the gods, invented the myths, but did not tell lies. Rather, they used myths to conceal the deep cosmological and spiritual truths that were available to them. This "defense of poetry" can be traced to an early date (sixth century B.C.E.), but was more widely accepted in the centuries after Christ. In that view the poets were philosophers who communicated deep truths in the form of fables. Thus, the poets did not distort "the ancient wisdom," but preserved it. Some adherents of this idea thought that the poets deliberately concealed their truths so that they would not be profaned by the masses, while leaving them accessible to those with deep understanding.[10]

We might summarize these four theories of myth origins as follows:

I. Authorship Model
   A. Poets as Liars
   B. Poets as Sages
II. "Evolutionary" Model
   A. Needs of Primitive Man
   B. Cult of the Heroes
III. "Revelation" Model

In terms of chronology, the authorship model is the oldest, and begins with I.A. It is also the most enduring of the models, with I.B becoming predominant in the early Christian era. The "evolutionary" model is the child of the fifth century B.C.E., a model that received new impetus from the theory of Euhemerus

in the third century. It fits well with the paradigm of *physis* (nature), as it sees myth as a natural development appropriate to the challenging conditions of the earliest humans. The Roman poet Lucretius, who also saw myths as arising out of the abject conditions of human origins, attributed ideas about gods and their attributes to terrifying dreams.[11] The "revelation" model that arose in the following century might be understood as a reaction to the pessimistic picture of the human condition sketched by the "evolutionists." It is a good fit for the paradigm of *theos* (god). In the fourth century three of the major philosophical schools adopted some form of "creationism" (a broad generalization that include theories that god had either a direct or an indirect role in the creation of the world and humans). Accordingly, a benevolent god or gods revealed his wisdom to mankind in the form of myths at the beginning of human existence.

The criticism and interpretation of myth was begun by the early cosmologists and philosophers and quickly became their monopoly. The thinkers of the sixth and fifth centuries were interested primarily in cosmology (the origin and makeup of the universe) and theology (the nature of god or the divine). They were also very much concerned with the question of how god was related to nature. The writings of the poets provided the catalysts for analyzing these questions. As a result, the study of myth stayed focused on the origins of things and their makeup. Myths were worth studying for what they might potentially yield for understanding these big issues. As intellectual interests broadened into the examination of human society and individual psychology, it was again the philosophers who made them their property. When philosophers in later antiquity undertook to classify myths, they treated them, unsurprisingly, as types of philosophical fable. All this had a positive side: the philosophers deserve much of the credit for saving myths from the attacks of critics and censors by explaining them as disguised philosophy.[12] This defense proved to be especially valuable in the early Christian and medieval eras.

The natural philosophers were followed by the earliest historians. Some of these, like Hecataeus, also pursued mathematical and philosophical interests. (In the history of Greek thought, multidisciplinarity preceded specialization.) The historians, too, were imbued with the spirit of Greek skepticism and regarded many popular beliefs as foolish. When they analyzed accounts of the deeds of great heroes, or the interactions of gods and men, they invariably posed the question of whether what was described was possible according to natural criteria. Because humans could do only what was humanly possible, and gods could do only what conformed to nature, many stories were declared to be unbelievable.[13]

The Greeks knew what myths were, but they had no single word for "myth." The closest to it was *muthos* (the origin of our word "myth"). However, Greek *muthos* had far too many meanings to be useful as a descriptor of what we mean by "myth" in the general sense. It could mean any kind of talk or

conversation, the subject matter of a conversation, design or purpose, and, of course, a story. Thus it was no more useful than *logos*, which had a similar, perhaps even broader, range of meanings. A third term, *plasma*, was also used to indicate clearly that a story was contrived, i.e., fictitious.

The Greeks were also late in developing narrative theory. They developed a sophisticated terminology for distinguishing genres of literature (epic, lyric, tragedy, comedy, etc.), but took little or no interest in distinguishing one kind of story from another. The earliest writers on myth did not distinguish between a set allegory within an epic, an Aesopian fable, or a philosophical myth composed to illustrate a philosophical doctrine. These distinctions had to await the early fifth century C.E., when Macrobius, a philosopher and literary theorist, addressing the question of the value of myths for teaching philosophy, proposed a division of fable into the following: (1) stories filled with the imaginary doings of lovers (comic plays and novels or "romances"); (2a) fictitious tales such as the stories of Aesop that call the reader's attention to kinds of virtue; (2b) the fabulous narrative (*narratio fabulosa*), which under a cover of fiction contains real truth. His examples of the last (and best) type include stories of the gods by Hesiod and Orpheus,[14] and the mystical teachings of the Pythagoreans.[15] All is directed to the usefulness of myth for philosophy without any serious examination of the narrative structure of the different types of story.

The above may help to explain why the Greeks did not consider myth a category of thought that could be investigated. Although they were very interested in the origin and meaning of myths, they never asked the basic question, "What is myth?" Moderns have asked this question many times, but no answer has appeared yet that is to everyone's satisfaction. Moderns have also tried to differentiate myth from such categories as religion and literature; such attempts were rare among Greek thinkers. Moderns also ask, "How does myth function in particular societies?"[16]—another question that did not occur to the Greeks, except to those who saw myths as instruments of social control. And while some Greeks were aware of religious and cultural similarities and differences between themselves and other peoples, they rarely noted similarities between *stories*. They might have observed, for instance, the close narrative similarities between the doings of Hercules and the biblical Samson, had they been interested in the stories of their neighbors.[17] However, they did question their own myths and they did interpret them.

We do not mean to claim that the Greeks were the first people on the planet to question or disbelieve their myths. It is hard to think that the Babylonian astronomers who could plot the course of the planets and divide the circle into 360 degrees believed that humans were created out of the carcass of a monster slain by a god, as claimed in the "Babylonian Creation Story." It is just as difficult to think that the Egyptian architects, who knew enough geometry to create the enormous pyramids that stand to this day, believed that Isis literally

gathered the body bits of the dismembered Osiris, put them back together, and restored him to life. There were doubtless always those who disbelieved myths, even those that were part of a people's most sacred tenets of faith. Yet if these moments of disbelief were ever recorded, the documents have been lost. So much (too much) history is based on the fate of books. We should keep in mind that the Greeks learned much from the surrounding peoples whose civilizations were much older. They adapted the alphabet invented by the Phoenicians. They must surely have learned some geometry from the Egyptians, even if we have only the writings of Pythagoras and Euclid. The same would apply to the Babylonians as a source for Greek astronomy, even though we must depend on Hipparchus and Ptolemy for our knowledge of ancient astronomy. But if they learned skepticism from their neighbors, no document has surfaced to prove it.

Given this gap in our knowledge, we must rely on the Greeks to teach us about the earliest questioning of traditional myths, and more importantly, about how they found ways of understanding them so that they accorded with new hypotheses about the cosmos. Because the Greeks experienced a long period of illiteracy after the Mycenaean Age, we know next to nothing about their ways of thinking about myth until the appearance of written versions of Homer and Hesiod in the sixth century B.C.E. This is not to suggest that literature did not exist in oral form in "Dark Age" Greece before writing was rediscovered, probably in the eighth century C.E. Indeed, a great deal of work has been done on the oral composition and oral transmission of literature.[18] We even have evidence for oral interpretation of Homer's poems from Plato's dialogue *Ion*.[19] Unfortunately, Plato does not allow Ion to speak his interpretations of Homer, so we have no idea what they were like.

For all practical purposes, poetry and criticism appeared almost simultaneously in written form. At that point, the criticism and interpretation of literature became a public matter. Critiques were written and shared and became part of the public domain. A writer could relay his thoughts on a poet's teaching from his home in, say, Ephesus (western Turkey) to a friend in Sicily or southern Italy. A common language, literacy, and navigation made the sharing of ideas a real possibility in the far-flung colonies of the Greeks. But written communication was not simply a private matter between friends. The spread of literacy soon led to the notion of publication: making one's views public and accepting the consequences.

The beginnings of public criticism occurred roughly at the same time as the earliest authoritative texts came to be in a fixed written form. This may be pure coincidence, since the earliest expressions of critical opinion are couched in very general terms and might be based on oral reception. Yet it is interesting that the works of Homer were published in versions commissioned by political authority at about the same time as the earliest attacks on Homer's veracity and moral values were issued. Pisistratus, the tyrant of Athens, who