



ESJ Humanities

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Submitted: 29 October 2020
Published: 30 November 2020

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DOI: [10.19044/esj.2020.v16n32p1](https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2020.v16n32p1)

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Cite as:
Shaughnessy, M. (2020). A Reflective Conversation With Professor Louis Markos About Myths And The Humanities?. *European Scientific Journal*, *ESJ*, 16(32),1.
<https://doi.org/10.19044/esj.2020.v16n32p1>

Invited Editorial:
**A Reflective Conversation With
Professor Louis Markos About
Myths And The Humanities?**

Abstract

Louis Markos holds a BA in English and History from Colgate University and an MA and PhD in English from the University of Michigan. He is a Professor of English and Scholar in Residence at Houston Baptist University, where he holds the Robert H. Ray Chair in Humanities and teaches courses on British Romantic and Victorian Poetry and Prose, the Greek and Roman Classics, C. S. Lewis, and J. R. R. Tolkien. He is the author of twenty books, including *The Myth Made Fact: Reading Greek and Roman Mythology through Christian Eyes*, *Ancient Voices: An Insider's Look at Classical Greece*, *On the Shoulders of Hobbits: The Road to Virtue with Tolkien and Lewis*, *Apologetics for the Twenty First Century*, *From Achilles to Christ: Why Christians Should Read the Pagan Classics*, *Lewis Agonistes: How C. S. Lewis can Train us to Wrestle with the Modern and Postmodern World*, *Atheism on Trial*, and *The Dreaming Stone* and *In the Shadow of Troy*, children's novels in which his kids become part of Greek Mythology and the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. He has produced two lecture series on C. S. Lewis and literary theory with The Teaching Company/Great Courses, published 300 book chapters, essays, and reviews, given well over 300 public lectures in some two dozen states as well as Rome, Oxford, and British Columbia, and had his adaptations of *The Iphigenia in Tauris* of Euripides, *The Helen* of Euripides, and *The Electra* of Sophocles performed off-Broadway. He is committed to the concept of the Professor as Public Educator and believes

that knowledge must not be walled up in the Academy but must be disseminated to all who have ears to hear. Visit his amazon author page at [amazon.com/author/louismarkos](https://www.amazon.com/author/louismarkos) In

this interview he responds to questions about his latest book!

Subject: Humanities, Myths

1. *Professor Markos, you have just finished a very interesting book about myths and mythology- first what got you interested in mythology?*

As the grandson of four Greek immigrants, I have always loved Greek mythology. I not only loved the stories as stories, but I loved how those stories helped me to struggle with such big questions as why I am here and what is my purpose. I also loved myths that tried to explain the origins of things. Myths like Pandora's Box and Prometheus stealing the fire helped to make sense of our world, which had such goodness in it and yet was so clearly broken.

2. *Now what is it about Greek mythology? Seems we always come back to the Greeks?*

Aside from being a person of Greek heritage, as a man of the Western world, I find in the great Greek myths the raw material of so many aspects of European and American culture. As a Christian, Greek mythology is also important because God chose to enter human history in a world that was very Greco-Roman and that was still wrestling with the issues raised by mythology.

3. *Now, indirectly, what have been some of the Greek contributions to the Humanities?*

The Golden Age of Greece (5th BC Athens) gave birth to tragedy (Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides), comedy (Aristophanes), history, anthropology, and political science (Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon), classical sculpture and architecture (Phidias), philosophy (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle), and rhetoric and oratory (Demosthenes). Out of Aristotle came most of the majors that are still used in colleges today. To speak more broadly, the Greeks taught us, not to think, but to think about thinking.

4. *The Iliad and the Odyssey come to mind as two influential books-that continue to be read- what is it about those two books?*

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* stand at the beginning of Western literature. The *Iliad* helps us to understand what it means to be mortal, and how we can deal with such things as death and grief. The *Odyssey* tells us about what it means to be a specific person, and why it is important to return to our home and our family, even when we are tempted to stay behind. We might also say the *Iliad* is the first great tragedy, with its focus on death and the fall of civilization, while the *Odyssey* is the first comedy, with its focus on reunions and family and the joys of the domestic hearth.

5. *Jason and the Argonauts was yet another “myth” that may have some facts behind it. What is the true story?*

I think that Jason would be a legendary character rather than a pure myth. In that sense, he is like Achilles or Odysseus or King Arthur: all figures that are probably based on some kind of historical fact, though they likely did not do all the deeds ascribed to them. Since Jason discovered the Golden Fleece along the southeast corner of the Black Sea, I tend to look at the Jason legend as one that embodies memories of immigration from west to east and east to west. Since the Black Sea was the breadbasket of Greece, and still is to a certain extent, the Golden Fleece may also have been the golden wheat that the Greeks needed to survive. Troy is located along the Dardanelles, and both Troy and the land of the Golden Fleece were certainly important in terms of trade in and out of the Black Sea.

6. *Your book is subtitled” Reading Greek and Roman Mythology through Christian Eyes” First can you tell us in your mind, the differences between Greek and Roman Mythology and why thru “ Christian Eyes”?*

Greek and Roman mythology are quite similar, with Ovid synthesizing the best of Greek mythology and giving it a Roman polish and organization. In this book, I show that Christians who believe that the Bible is true, but that mythology is fictional, can still learn real truths from Greek mythology. I want to move away from the idea that Christians can only learn real truths from the Bible. Yes, I believe that only the Bible is fully reliable, but that does not mean that Greek mythology is all lies.

7. *What do you mean by Christian eyes? Since there are so many different religions?*

From a Christian point of view, God only spoke directly through the Bible, the prophets, and Jesus, but he still does speak through our conscience, through the created world, and through the dreams and desires of the pre-Christian people whose yearnings often found their way into myths. I believe there are bits and pieces of truth in all religions and all cultures, but the only place where complete truth is to be found is in the Incarnate Word of God who said of himself, “I am the Truth” (John 14:6). With Christ as the measure and touchstone of Truth, much can be learned of eternal value from mythology.

8. *Currently many countries of the world are dealing with strife and turmoil- not to mention COVID-19. What does Greek and Roman mythology have to say to all of these people around the world who are suffering?*

Mythology certainly entertains us and gives us a respite from our pain, confusion, and suffering, but it also is necessary in times of plague, for it offers a platform for wrestling with the nature of God, Man, and the Universe. These ancient myths, that have been told and retold for thousands of years, provide us with a wider perspective of the human condition that can help us to make sense of COVID-19.

9. *I recall the Athenian city states of Athens and Sparta- how have they impacted mythology and the writing of myths?*

Although Homer and Hesiod, composing at the end of the 8th century, provided the literary foundation for mythology, it was during the Golden Age of Athens that these myths were gathered and passed on and embodied in tragedies and other forms of literature. It was probably in Athens that the Iliad and Odyssey were first put into written form—before that they had been composed and carried down orally. Although my grandparents came from Sparta, I must admit that the military society of Sparta did little to pass down the myths; though the Spartans were religious people, they were not literary.

10. *Rome, the eternal city, was not built in a day- but what literature in the myth realm emanated from Rome?*

Some think that the Romans merely took the Greek myths and religion and made it their own, changing Zeus to Jupiter, Hera to Juno, and so forth. But what the Romans did is graft the Greek pantheon and myths on to their own local deities and stories. They, especially Virgil and Ovid, provided some of the best tellings of the myths. Yes, they imitated, but not in a slavish way. The only major Roman myth for which we have no Greek original is the lovely tale of Cupid and Psyche.

11. *The personalities of key figures can be highlighted in myths and of course in your book. Can you give us one example?*

Hercules may be the most colorful and best-known character in Greek mythology. He was the son of Zeus and the strongest man in the world, but more often than not his passions got the best of him and landed him in trouble. Many of his greatest deeds were done as a form of penance for his impulsiveness. But he remains great because, when he was a young hero, he chose the arduous path of virtue over the easy path of vice and helped save Greece from the reign of beasts, allowing civilization to thrive.

12. *What do you see as the “great themes” of literature that are highlighted in your book? Or books if you have done more than one?’*

I often focus on three sets of three questions: Who am I, why am I here, and what is my purpose? What is the nature of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful? What is the nature of the Good Man, the Good State, and the Good Life? On a wider scale: how do I know I am of value, and how can I find meaning in a world that seems so uncaring.

13. *Now, in the schools and college classrooms- why should contemporary college students and even high school students learn about mythology?*

Lest we be trapped in a small and tight contemporary bubble, we must reach out and understand that human nature does not change: that our ancestors struggled with the same demons that we do today, and that, although we have matured past them in some ways, they still surpass us in others.

We must keep the communication lines between ages open, and myth is one of the best ways to do that. We are all part of a story; the myths allow us to expand on that story and to understand it better.

14. *Who publishes this book and where can people who love mythology get a copy?*

This book was published by Classical Academic Press (CAP), and I am proud to say that they have poured all of their resources into it, making it a book that is beautiful to look at and that is filled with all sorts of resources. It can be pre-ordered now on Amazon or through CAP at a special pre-publication discount. Let me also add that I produced with CAP an 18-lecture audio/video series that accompanies the book but in a different format. Here are the links for the book and the lecture series:

<https://classicalacademicpress.com/products/myth-made-fact>

<https://www.classicalu.com/course/myth-made-fact/>

15. *Some authors have supplementary materials to assist readers in understanding their books. Do you have any online resources?*

The book includes online resources with PowerPoints I put together of how the classical painters and sculptors depicted mythology, especially as it was retold by Ovid. It also includes readings from Bullfinch's Mythology.

16. *What have I neglected to ask?*

What I would like to add is that this book can be used in many ways. It is a great book to read from beginning to end if you love mythology and want to wrestle with the ideas raised by the great myths. It also could be read as a devotional book, reading a chapter or two in the morning or evening and then meditating on it. It is also a great book to be used by teachers or students of all ages, and it is particularly good for classical Christian schools and homeschoolers.

Finally, because every chapter is filled with open-ended questions it is a great book to be used for either Bible study groups or book reading groups that like to learn about new things and new ideas. It really is a multi-faceted book.