

Lesson 5 Ancient Worlds of Imagination

Baucis and Philemon

Long ago, two strangers traveled through a certain district, asking for food and shelter as they went. For a long time, they found nothing but refusals from both the rich and the poor. Finally, they came to a little cottage where a poor old couple, Baucis and Philemon, lived.

The two had little to offer since they lived entirely from the produce of their small piece of land, a goose, and a few goats and pigs. Nevertheless, they were prompt to ask the strangers in and to set their best before them. They pulled their chairs forward for their guests. Philemon put a piece of broken pot under one table leg, and Baucis rubbed the table top with fresh mint and set some water over the fire.

They set out their best delicacies on the table. There were fresh vegetables baked over the fire as well as wine. There was a big bowl in the middle of the table to mix the wine with water.

The second course had to be fruit, and there were nuts, dried dates, grapes, and apples, for it was their best season of the year. Baucis even had it in mind to kill their only goose for dinner, and there was a great squawking that went on for a long time. Poor old Baucis wore herself out trying to catch that goose, but somehow the animal always got away from her, until the guests made her let it be, for they had been well served so far. It was a good meal, and the old couple continued to encourage their visitors to eat and drink, not caring that they were now consuming in one day what would ordinarily have lasted a week.

At last, the wine sank low in the mixing bowl, and Philemon rose to get some more. He was astonished to find the bowl full again, as if it had never been touched before. Then he whispered to Baucis that the two strangers must be gods, and Baucis also was awed and afraid.

However, the gods smiled kindly at them and identified themselves as Zeus and Hermes. Hermes said, "Both of you welcomed us beneath your roof this day when others refused us shelter.

Be sure those shall be punished who would not help the wandering strangers, but you shall have whatever reward you choose. Tell us what you will have."

The old man thought for a little while with his eyes bent on the ground, and then he said: "We have lived happily together here for many years, even though the times have been hard. But never have we turned strangers away or asked for a reward for entertaining them. To have spoken with the immortals face to face is a thing few men can boast of. In this small cottage, humble though it is, the gods have sat at meal. Neither this place nor we deserve the honor. If, therefore, you will do something for us, turn this cottage into a temple where the gods may always be served and where we may live out the rest of our days."

"You have spoken well," said Hermes, "and you shall have your wish. Yet is there not anything that you would desire for yourselves?"

At this, the husband glanced over at old Baucis with her thin, gray hair and her rough hands. Baucis said, "We have lived together for many years, and in all that time never has there been a word of anger between us. Now, at last, we are growing old and our long companionship is coming to an end.

Grant us this one request, that when we come to die, we may perish in the same hour, so that neither of us would be left without the other."

She looked at Philemon, and he nodded in approval, so the old couple turned their eyes on the gods.

"It shall be as you desire," said Hermes. "Few would have made such a good and moderate request."

Before long, the house became a temple, and the neighbors, amazed at the change, often came to worship and left offerings for the gods. For many years, Baucis and Philemon lived in peace, passing from old to extreme old age. At last, they were so old and bowed that it seemed they could only walk if they clung to each other. One evening, it took them longer than ever to reach the usual spot they would visit every day to look at the temple. There they held each other's arms, thinking that it was perhaps the last time their limbs would support them. As they stood, each one felt the other change and only had time to turn and say "Farewell," before they lost their human shapes completely. Now there stood two tall trees growing closely side by side with the branches intertwined. They swayed in the passing breeze as if they nodded and whispered to each other.

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Sun Mythology

Ancient cultures recognized the sun's power to sustain life, so it was held in a place of honor in most mythologies.

The Incas who lived in modern day Peru from the 12th to 16th centuries incorporated the sun in many aspects of their culture, from holidays to agriculture. Their sun god, Inti, was one of their most powerful gods. The Incan royal family was said to be directly descended from Inti, so his temples were considered important. The Temple of the Sun, in the capital city Cuzco, was made of carved stone and filled with luxurious gold objects.

In Baltic mythology, the sun was represented by Saule, the mother and ruler of the world, who determined the well-being of all life on the earth. Depicted as a blonde woman wearing a golden scarf and a golden crown, Saule lived in a palace at the end of the sea, where she tended a garden of golden apples. Saule would ride across the sky in a chariot pulled by two tireless white horses.

Saule was not the only solar god to ride a vehicle across the sky. The Greek gods Helios and Apollo were both shown riding chariots through the heavens.

The Egyptian sun god Ra was said to ride in a solar boat during the day. At night, he sailed underwater until he returned to the sky in the east.

The sun has been a central figure in some of the world's most enduring myths. That is because there would be no life without that immense force in the sky.