

The Orphic Theogony

ΟΡΦΙΚΗ ΘΕΟΓΟΝΙΑ

Orpheus

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A modern narrative reconstruction of the Orphic cosmogony, weaving the scattered fragments preserved in Damascius, Proclus, Olympiodorus and the later Neoplatonists into the connected myth they once told: the Beginning Which Cannot Be Spoken; Time, Aether, and the silvery cosmic egg; the four kingdoms of Phanes, Night, Heaven, and Saturn; the fifth kingship of Jove who swallows Phanes and engenders the world anew; and the dismemberment and rebirth of Zagreus-Bacchus, by whose mystery rite mortal souls are released from the wheel of birth.

I. To the Reader

To the reader of this text, if you feel that goodness and virtue are things that only fools pursue, take my advice and close this book; you will find nothing here that will interest you. But if you are a reader who loves beauty and who possesses a well-meaning disposition, please do read on. You are welcome and will hear a story both marvelous and useful.

II. Prologue

Come son of Latona, golden-haired Apollo, whose will echoes the Father of Gods and men: illuminate my mind! Come Memory, wise queen, and awaken things learned long ago, things which beg to again come to light! Our minds are darkened with clouds and our hearts are downtrodden, tormented by mundane trials which never end. Console us and tell us something splendid that we may triumph over our interminable tribulations! Oh lovely many-formed Muses, guide my heart and guide

my hands that I might retrieve the marvelous narrative given to us long ago by the great theologian who sang with a lyre of gold, the genesis of the greatest of the blessed deathless Gods, those born from Earth and the blood of Heaven. Then

these thoughts appeared in the ether of my mind, "Take the fragments scattered in the texts of those who unwittingly hid them. Arrange their content in a mighty poem, easy to understand for the pious, yet obscure to the profane, that it might give solace once again to the souls of virtuous mortals, of yours and future generations, who are able to perceive the beauty concealed within the story it tells." And thus I, one not special at all, began my holy task; may the Gods make obvious graceful and lovely words, worthy of its content!

III. The First King

What was at the very beginning cannot be explained or understood; it can only be spoken of indirectly because there is no way to comprehend something in which its points of differentiation have yet to be expressed. It is called the Beginning Which Cannot Be Spoken. It is not created; it

did not come to be; it has always been. It is there before anything else; it is there at the beginning; it is now and will always be. Orpheus, the founder of Mysteries, tells us that within this undifferentiated mixture are Earth and Water and it is from the dance of these two that everything which is comes to be. For Ageless Time was moved by Necessity and gave birth to Aether and a limitless chasm which extended in every direction, and everything was in tumult. In the Aether, Time formed a silvery egg, the offspring of Aether and Chaos. And the egg began to move in an enormous and wondrous circle and from the egg The Lightbringer, Phanes emerged, and as he was born, the Aether and the Chasm were torn apart. Behold the son of Aether! The First-Born! The Shining One! Who by his nature illumines everything and was the first to appear in the Aether! Witness his four eyes looking everywhere and marvel at his four horns! Behold his golden wings which flutter all about! He bellows like a massive bull and roars like a lion! He is Ericapaeus, both male and female,

who harbors in his heart blind and swift Eros! He is Thought, the progenitor of the Gods, who call him the Revealer and First-born! He is

Bromius with the mighty voice; he is all-seeing Jove! He can be seen only by his daughter, but his effulgent light shining in the Aether draws wonder for those who behold it, illuminating the world with great brilliance. Now Phanes caused many things to occur. He built an everlasting dwelling for the Immortal Gods. He brought forth the Moon, which Gods call Luna, with mountains, cities, and mansions. And for the ephemeral beings he made a world separate from the Immortals, with natural laws and a Sun as their lord, neither too cold nor too hot, but appropriate for their needs. These things he, Ericapaeus the first king, made from his seat in the misty darkness of the Cave of his daughter Night. Oh glorious Phanes! You are Justice, Prudence, and Truth, begotten of Night who shines with stars! And thus did he divide the world between Gods and mortals.

IV. The Second King

Phanes then united with his daughter Night, the Mother of Dreams, and gave her the rulership. He placed in her hands his mighty staff, the scepter of Ericapaeus, and bestowed upon her the gift of prophecy.

V. The Third King

Night, the nurse of the Gods, made obvious those who were previously concealed: she gave birth to Earth and to Heaven, the limits of the mind, whose name means "sky," and she gave the scepter of Phanes to Heaven and thereby gave him the kingship. Heaven and Earth united and this is the first marriage. Now the royal couple produced children. Earth gave birth to the three Cyclopes and the three giant Hundred-Handers, but these were an unruly bunch and

Heaven cast them into the bowels of the Tartarus, for he had received an oracle that his own children would overthrow him. But when Heaven imprisoned her sons, Earth was greatly distressed, so she then gave birth to seven lovely daughters and seven kingly sons, indeed, the great Titans who are the powers of the natural world, they who drag or stretch.

The seven Titanic daughters are law-giving Themis and gentle Tethys the mother of Cypris, Moneta the mother of the fair-haired Muses, and happy Theia the mother of light. And Earth bore beautiful Dione the mother of procreation, radiant Phoebe who held the seat at Delphi, and glorious Ops the mother of the aegis-bearing Olympian king of all. The seven Titanic sons are querying Polus the father of Latona and Starry Asteria, Crius, the Ram, lord of the vast constellations, mighty Phorcys who rules the great depths of the Sea, light-giving Hyperion the father of the Sun and the Moon, genial Iapetus the father of the race of men, Oceanus who encircles and envelops the earth with his many streams, and greatest of all, kingly Saturn, he who strikes (awakens) the mind, father of glorious children. Of all these mighty sons and daughters of Earth it was Saturn who Night cherished and cultivated. Earth pleaded with the Titans to overthrow their father for having cast her progeny into Tartarus. All the siblings rallied to her supplication with the exception of Ocean who brooded darkly in the halls of his palace trying to decide what to do. The plot angered the mighty God

against his mother and even more so against his siblings, so he declined to join them. Earth gave Saturn an adamant sickle and when Heaven came to lie with her, the Titans overtook and bound him while Saturn cut off his genitals. The members of Heaven flew through the air into the wine-dark sea and swirled about in the restless blue waters forming a wondrous foam out of which emerged beautiful Heavenly

Venus, the mother of Harmonia, and as she was born, Zeal and Fraud took her into their care.

VI. The Fourth King

These things having been accomplished, Saturn assumed the kingship; he deserved this by his very nature and for having borne the greatest weight of the deed done to his father. He married his sister Ops, and the other siblings married one another, Tethys and Ocean, Phoebe and Polus, Theia and Hyperion, Themis and Iapetus, and the others. Saturn and Ops now produced glorious children: Vesta and Juno, as well as Pluto and Neptune. But Saturn also had been given an oracle that his rule would be usurped by one of his children, so he swallowed them, one

by one, as they came into the world, but Ops despised this and contrived a plan. The next child came forth, glorious Jove, and at the birth of Jove, Ops became the Earth-Mother, Ceres. She deceived Saturn by presenting him with a rock around which she wrapped swaddling clothes. Saturn promptly swallowed the rock, thinking it was his newborn son. This caused him to vomit up all the Titanic children. Pluto now took his seat on Earth wielding his Cap of Invisibility, the symbol of his power. Neptune took residence in the Sea, wielding the Trident. The other son of Saturn too was destined for great things, but the time was not yet ripe. Jove was rushed to the cave of starry-eyed Night in great secrecy and placed under the care of Adrastea and her sister Ida, the daughters of Melisseus and Amalthea. To prevent Saturn from hearing the cries of the child, Adrastea stood in front of the cave and loudly clashed brazen cymbals and beat a goat-skin drum while the bronze-rattling Curetes, the three handsome sons of Ops, shared in this clamorous labor and protected them all. Meanwhile, Jove grew in strength and when the time was ripe, blessed Night instructed him, "When your father is in

the oaken wood and drunk

with the fruit of bees, then bind him!" Jove told his mother all that which the Goddess decreed and, acting upon her advice, Ops threw a magnificent banquet and, along with course after course of delicious ambrosia, she gave Saturn great drafts of golden honey. Soon the powerful Titan became inebriated; the room of the great hall began to spin all around him and he longed for the open air. Saturn left the banquet and wandered about; at last he laid down and fell asleep, snoring loudly. Jove and his confidants went in search of him, and, just as Night had foretold, they found him in the oaken wood, oblivious to their actions. They bound the God and Jove castrated him, just as Saturn had previously castrated his own father.

VII. The Fifth King

And then Jove went to the Sacred Cave and asked, "Mother, supreme of all the Gods, immortal Night, how am I to proceed? How can I inaugurate my rule with the immortal Gods? How can I keep all things as one, yet separate?" And blessed Night, gleaming with the blue of dawn, answered him saying, "Surround everything in the Aether ...the

heavens, the earth, the sea, and the stars... and bind them all with a golden aetherial chain." Thus mighty Jove engulfed and swallowed Ericapaeus, employing all of his power, and drew everything that existed into the hollow of his belly. And now all things in Jove were created anew: the sky, the sea, the earth, and all the blessed and immortal Gods and Goddesses, all that was then, and all that will be, all mingled in the belly of Jove.

VIII. The Great Rhapsodic Hymn to Jove

Jove is the first and the last, the lord of lightning. Jove is the head and center, for all things are from Jove. Jove is born

male; immortal Jove comes forth a female. Jove is the foundation of earth and starry heaven. Jove is sovereign of all for he is the first cause of all things. In one divine power, emerging one divinity, the commander of the world. One regal body in which everything revolves: Fire and Water and Earth and Aether, and both Night and Day, and Thought, the first-begotten one and lovely Eros.

For these are all in the mighty body of Jove. Behold his head and handsome countenance, the radiant sky. Around his golden hair are the gleaming stars twinkling beautifully. And there are great golden bull's horns on either side of his head, the rising and setting (sun), the heavenly pathway of the Gods. His eyes are the Sun, reflected in the Moon. His mind is kingly truth itself, the immortal Aether, hearing and considering all: nothing which is, no word nor cry nor noise nor voice, escapes the ear of the mightiest son of Saturn. Thus indeed his immortal head and mind, now then his radiant body, boundless, undisturbed. His fearless, strong limbs, exceedingly mighty are formed thus: the shoulders and chest and broad back of the God, formed of the air all surrounding. He generates wings whereupon he flies everywhere. His divine belly is Earth, the mother of all, with her imposing hills and mountain peaks.

The belt about his middle is a wave of the deep-voiced sea and ocean! His feet, the foundation of earth, are dank Tartarus and earth's furthest limit! Hiding all things yet causing them to newly emerge into delightful light, he brings them forth again from his heart, acting in divine wonderment! And now Jove produced many children: Jove mingled with Necessity and generated Fate. As Night had foretold in oracle, law-giving Themis was barren until the birth of Jove , but then she bore him glorious children, for she is the mother of the Seasons: Justice, Good-Order, and Peace, those

ministers of Jove who by their dancing make manifest the progression of Nature. And by her daughter Good-Order he fathered the Graces: Splendor, Merriment, and Abundance. Jove pursued Dione, but she escaped his caresses, and his divine seed fell into the sea. In spring, the season of new flowers, the seed spawned a wondrous foam from which the popular Venus came forth, she who awakens laughter and who blesses the physical union of mortals.

By many-named Juno he fathered Vulcan the Coppersmith who is called the lame God and the untiring fire. Vulcan became the greatest of craftsman, for, as he had an inclination to make things, the Cyclopes, those three divine craftsmen who fashioned the thunderbolt of Jove, taught him the art of creating beautiful brazen objects. Vulcan mingled with Venus and thereby created the form of the universe, and then he united with Splendor and produced Good-Glory, Abundance, Good-Omen, and Friendliness, by which his works are made beautiful. With Juno, whose form is like the air, Jove fathered invulnerable Mars the mighty God of Life and struggle, youthful Juventia, and Aletheia who protects the births of our progeny. Jove continued to father glorious children, manly Diana and her brother Apollo the shining one, for which the Titan Leto is called the mother of twins. Diana is the great huntress who with her dogs seeks beautiful prey to receive her arrows. She is a great boon to women, for she assists them in childbirth. Apollo, the slayer of the Python, unites the two streams of oracular ability: one stems from Jove, for he sits at his father's side and proclaims his will, and the other originates with Earth who gave it to

Themis who gave it to Phoebe who at last passed it on to him for all time. Apollo plays the mystic lyre which spins our souls to Freedom, for which he is known as the great Liberator. With cave-dwelling Maia he produced cheerful and clever

Mercury, the luck-bringing messenger of the deathless Gods, who is cherished for his great love of mankind. And from his head, Jove produced happy Minerva, a glory to behold all gleaming in bronze and bearing arms, for she is adorned with shining armor at her birth. Hail Minerva, the Slayer of Gorgons! who accomplishes great deeds and realizes the will of the son of Saturn! You are pure Virtue! Of the Goddesses, you exceed them all in command of the loom and the art of spinning. The skillful Cyclopes taught both you and Vulcan the disciplines necessary to create all the clever works of heaven! Oh athletic maiden! You are the empyrean guardian power who shares the dance of the vigilant Curetes and have become their leader! Jove took up the invincible Thunderbolt, crafted for him by the one-eyed Cyclopes, and the Staff of Phanes passed down through all the line of kings; he now took saddle upon a comely she-goat which transported

him to his throne in the Sky. Night bid him to keep Law, Justice, and Piety at his side; this he did and commenced his glorious reign. And joined with him in marriage is his sister Juno, of equal rank with him.

IX. The Olympian Gods

Jove now appealed to his father, "Glorious Daimon, how must I set up this generation?" And pure Saturn gave him lengthy advice. Thus Jove divided up the kingdom amongst the greatest of the Gods, he and eleven others, for which they are known as the Dii Consentes, the Twelve Olympian Gods. And he gave them each governance over one of the Natural Laws: Vesta, Mars, Diana, Vulcan, Juno, Neptune, Minerva, Venus, Apollo, Mercury, Jupiter, and Ceres.

X. The Sixth King

The Life of Zagreus

Mighty cloud-gathering Jove, with deep fore-knowledge, understood that he must marry his mother Ceres, she who designed the works of the droning bees, but Ceres resisted his advances and transformed herself

into a serpent. Jove responded by becoming a serpent himself and the two intertwined in a Knot of Hercules producing the Daughter Proserpina. When adequate time had passed and life-giving Proserpina was at the bloom of her youth, Jove again became a serpent, united with her, and produced the child Zagreus, the sweet child of his father. And the leaping Curetes danced about his cradle, clashing their cymbals, stamping their feet to the beat of the drum. When the boy-God was yet young, his father set him on a throne and placed the scepter in his hands. All the Gods were gathered in awe and much-honored Jove declared, "Listen you Gods! Behold, here is your king! Later, the seven pairs of Titans, with faces smeared with gypsum, approached Zagreus, and presented him with a basket containing seven toys: a Mirror, Knuckle-Bones, a Sphere, a Top, an Apple, a Pine Cone, and a Tuft of Hair. Little Zagreus peaked inside the basket and glimpsed his own reflection radiating back at him. He picked up the beautiful Mirror and was mesmerized by his image. The Titans took advantage of

his state of wonderment and seized him. But Zagreus resisted and tried many sundry ways to escape them. He transformed himself into the tiniest little things, thinking he would surely slip through their fingers, but the Titans would not relax their grip. Next he became all manner of creatures from the sea, first the spineless jellyfish and the spinning crustaceans, he became the swimming fish, both small and large, and he turned into a wondrous dolphin, and a shark, and many creatures long forgot, but the Titans would not relax their grip. Now Zagreus became four-footed creatures, a mouse, a

dog, a lion, and a great panther. He became a goat, a wild horse, and all the other numerous cloven-footed animals, and finally a great bull, but the Titans would not relax their grip. And after so many divers transformations, whirling from one to another, from female to male and back again, over and over into all the vast plenitude of life, Zagreus grew dizzy and woke from his futile attempt to circumvent their plan. He found himself simply staring into the Mirror, unable to escape. The Titans took Zagreus and prepared him for a great meal. They cut him into seven pieces, but the heart, the seat of the Mind, was carefully

set aside and the limbs were left alone. The Titans then boiled the pieces and placed them on spits, roasting them, and they ate some of his flesh in a great holy rite. When the smoke of the sacrifice reached the palace of the all-seeing king, Jove immediately recognized the savor of his burning scion and understood what had occurred. He sent Blue-eyed Minerva to retrieve the heart; she placed it in a silver casket and delivered it to her father, and it is for this reason that she is known as Pallas, for the heart was still beating. Jove now summoned Apollo the giver of riches and said, "Collect the limbs of Wine, for he is the essence of my Aether which intoxicates the souls of all those who taste it!" Apollo sped swiftly to the great sacrifice, gathered the limbs with tenderness, and entombed them at his sanctuary on Mount Parnassus. And now with no delay the mighty son of Saturn stood before the Titans, in no mood for conversation. He lifted his great left arm straight into the clouds. A terrible clap of thunder bellowed from the vast sky like the roar of a powerful bull. The surrounding clouds exploded into light and from within emerged an enormous glowing bolt of lightning which took

perfect aim upon the Titans. All the heavens lit up and exposed colossal mountains of ominous dark clouds, crackling with lightning, the powerful weapon of Olympian Jove. And now the God bent his fury upon the earth with a torrent of massive thunderbolts, setting all ablaze and the Titans with it. The anger of the God continued for a great period of time, but at last the smoke dispersed and soot fell from the sky. From this ash, the remains of the blasted Titans who had eaten of Zagreus' flesh, Father Jove revealed a new generation of mortals. For under Phanes there had been a Golden Age of men. And under Saturn there was a Silver Age where men had very long lives. But there would now be a new age, the Titanic Age, with humans and sundry kinds of animals, some who fly, some walking, and others swimming, all of whom have souls from the soot, but in due time their bodies grow old and fade away or are destroyed by disease or violence. Their souls, however, are immortal and have as their source the Aether of Jove himself; they come back and are reborn in the mortal bodies of the various creatures, sometimes walking, sometimes swimming, or sometimes human, sometimes female and sometimes

male, being born and living a while but then fading away only to return, over and over, with little respite. And of this sorrowful cycle of births Jove had deep compassion, and he thereby devised a great plan, for from the still-beating heart of Zagreus would come a great Savior.

The Birth and Mission of Bacchus

As these events came to fruition, fresh seeds of hope were germinating which would have great import to all mankind, for beautiful Cypris of the fluttering eyelids had attracted the attention of strong-spirited Mars who delights in strife. The roaring rage of the invincible God of war was softened when he beheld the graceful tresses of Venus' hair. An exchange of

words ensued, a conversation which became an elegant dance spinning into rapturous passion, until at last they united; the quarrelsome God became one with the laughter-loving queen and they produced a lovely child which they named Harmonia. Now when Harmonia came of age, she was given by Jove to Cadmos, Agenor's son and the founder of Thebes. As Cadmus approached her from a distance, he was singing, and the bright-faced Sun arose behind him giving Cadmus the appearance of a glorious angel with light

radiating in every direction. They were married and produced children, a son and several daughters, the finest of which was comely Semele. Now it came to pass that the attention of Jove fell upon Semele, for she possessed a two-fold beauty, both of physical form, which was unsurpassed, but also within her heart. Jove proceeded to woo her, for he recognized in the girl a suitable vessel in which his providence would blossom. He united with the daughter of Cadmus, and the beating heart of Zagreus was nurtured within her womb. Jove was so pleased with Semele that he promised to return and grant her anything she desired. In the meanwhile, Juno, the queen of all, wife and sister to Jove, discovered this liaison. She transformed herself into an old woman and approached the door of the daughter of Cadmus, saying, "Young girl, you would do well to engage the help of a servant such as myself, for soon you will be burdened by all the duties of motherhood. Take me into your employ and I will soon make your life less troublesome. I am Beroe and I am a great solution to your predicament." And Semele took the advice of the old woman, having no knowledge of who she was. Soon she revealed to Beroe all that had transpired, and that her divine suitor was soon to

return and grant her anything she desired. Then the old woman smiled and said to her, "Oh, such a great opportunity!

Ask the mighty God to come to you in all his glory. Ask him to come to you as he comes to his wife Juno!" Beroe then went about her work and disappeared into the recesses of the home. Soon Jove returned and Semele made the request suggested by Beroe, but the mighty God looked deeply into her eyes and said, "Not this, Semele, not this." But his reluctance only made her desire for this wish stronger, and with this he left. When next he returned to the home of Semele, there was a great wind and thunder. The fire-bearing son of Saturn appeared before her crackling with lightning, but as he approached, she could not withstand his glory and was completely burnt away. Jove reached into the fire and retrieved the divine infant. He cut open his own thigh, placed the babe inside and sewed up the wound. When the months were up, the infant was born from the thigh of Jove himself for which the child-God is known as Thrice-Born. He was delivered to the Goddess Hipta, the soul of the universe, who placed him in a red basket wound about by a snake and carried him up Mount Ida to

be guarded by the mighty Curetes and placed into the care of the Mother of the Gods, who when the time was ripe, taught him the rites of the Mysteries. This child, conceived from the heart of Zagreus, is now born again and transformed into Bacchus, and it is he who, along with the Daughter Proserpina, initiates mortals into Mysteries and thereby frees them from this wheel of misery bringing the compassion of his father to fruition. And thus men make great sacrifices and practice the mystic rites yearning for freedom; and Jove, through his blessed Son, sets them free from the sting of endless passion and sufferings.