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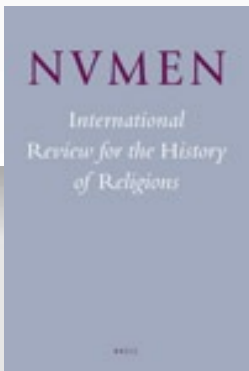
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## Views of Homeric Gods and Religion



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*Numen*, Vol. XXVI, Fasc. 2

In Book 12 of the *Iliad* the Trojans with Zeus' support penetrated the camp of the Greeks. Despite the temporary delay in the crisis when Poseidon rallied the Achaeans, their situation was pretty desperate and Agamemnon, never filled with confidence, was once more ready to throw in the towel. There was only one hope for the Greeks: if Zeus' attention could be diverted from the battle, then Poseidon, and the other gods who favoured the Greek side, might intervene in the uneven fight. These events, of course, led up to the famous scene of Zeus' deception in the 14th Book of the *Iliad*. All went well and according to plan: Hera, who had armed herself like a hero going into battle, accomplished her purpose with the help of Aphrodite's magic band.

It is a charming scene with many touches of humour but also some alien notes. Who are these gods who so easily fell prey to common human desires, and why did Zeus declare his love for Hera in a way which could not fail to offend his jealous wife? "... Never before," he said, has love for any goddess or woman so melted about the heart inside me, ... not ... when I loved the wife of Ixion, nor when I loved ... Danaë, ... Europa, ... Semele, or Alkmene, Demeter ... (or) Leto." <sup>1</sup> Hera for once ignored the insult. She seemed quite unmoved by Zeus' catalogue of conquests. There is a clash between Hera's human nature as Zeus' wife in myth and the traditional long list of alliances between Zeus and mortal as well as divine ladies. A somewhat similar scene occurs in the fifth Book of the *Odyssey* when Calypso was moved to accuse the gods of selfishness, because she herself must release Odysseus though other goddesses had often made mortals their husbands, like Demeter who, "lay down with Jason and loved him in a thrice-ploughed field." <sup>2</sup>

It was Gilbert Murray, I think, who first explained such gross misconduct on historical grounds. Homer's gods had originally been nature powers but in later times retained their characteristics as figures

<sup>1</sup> *Il.* 14, 215ff. Here and elsewhere Lattimore's translation has been used.

<sup>2</sup> *Od.* 5, 126f.

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