

THE LIFE OF HERCULES IN MYTH & LEGEND

BY JOSHUA J. MARK

Hercules is the Roman name for the Greek hero Herakles, the most popular figure from ancient Greek mythology. Hercules was the son of Zeus, king of the gods, and the mortal woman Alcmene; and so Hercules was born a demi-god with incredible strength and stamina.

He performed amazing feats, including wrestling death and traveling twice to the underworld, and his stories were told throughout Greece and later in Rome, yet his life was far from easy from the moment of his birth, and his relationships with others were often disastrous. This was because Hera, the wife of Zeus, knew that Hercules was her husband's illegitimate son and sought to destroy him. In fact, he was born with the name Alcaeus and later took the name Herakles, meaning "Glory of Hera", signifying that he would become famous through his difficulties with the goddess.

The demi-god, who suffered like mortals and who could make a mess of things in life just as easily as any mortal man or woman *but* could perform deeds no mortal would ever be able to do. Hercules was like an everyday man who suffered disappointments, had bad days - even bad years - and eventually died due to another's trickery. These stories, besides simply being entertaining, would have helped an ancient audience by letting them know that if bad things could happen to a hero like Hercules, they had nothing to complain about regarding the disappointments and tragedies in their own lives.

His inner strength and ability to endure hardships made him an inspirational figure to the people and a symbol of stability in the midst of chaos, even if it was a chaos he himself had caused.

Early Life

Although he was seen as the champion of the weak and a great protector, Hercules' personal problems started literally at birth. Hera sent two witches to prevent the birth, but they were tricked by one of Alcmene's servants and sent to another room. Hera then sent serpents to kill him in his cradle, but Hercules strangled them both. In one version of the myth, Alcmene abandoned her baby in the woods in order to protect him from Hera's wrath, but he was found by the goddess Athena who brought him to Hera, claiming he was an orphan child left in the woods who needed nourishment. Hera raised him for a while and later gave the infant back to Athena and told her to take care of the baby herself.



The Infant Hercules

He was brought up at the court of his supposed-father Amphitryon in Thebes, where he had the best tutors in the land who taught him wrestling, horseback riding, fencing, archery, how to drive a chariot, play the lyre, and sing. Hercules was so strong and not yet knew his own strength, that he accidentally killed one of his teacher.

He was then sent to tend the flocks to keep him out of trouble. This seems to have been an impossibility for Hercules, however, as he heard that the Theban army had been defeated by a band of Minyans and, feeling this was unjust, he led a band of Theban warriors to defeat the Minyans and restore order to Thebes. King Creon of Thebes gave Hercules his daughter, Megara, in marriage as a sign of his gratitude.

The Madness of Hera & the Twelve Labors

At this point in the story, Hercules was a young, successful hero, married and, in time, with three strong sons. Hera could not tolerate the situation and so she sent upon him a madness curse in which tricked him into killing his children (and, in some versions, Megara as well). He continued in his rage until Athena knocked him out with a stone and, when he came to, he was overwhelmed with the grief of what he had done.

He would have killed himself but his cousin Theseus convinced him that would be cowardly and that he must find a way to apologize for his sins. Hercules consulted the Oracle at Delphi who told him he must complete twelve labors to amend his sins.

The Twelve Labors of Hercules were:

1. **To kill the Nemean Lion** who was impervious to all weapons. He trapped the lion in a cave and strangled it with his bare hands. He then skinned it and ever after wore the skin as his cloak.



Hercules and the Nemean Lion

2. **Kill Hydra-** Hercules had to kill the monster known as the Hydra who had nine venomous heads and, when one was cut off, two more would grow in its place. With his nephew Lolaus, Hercules cut off the heads and Lolaus then seared the necks with a torch to prevent them from growing back. Hercules then dipped his arrows in the Hydra's blood for future use; since it was so venomous, it killed quickly. Because he had help in this labor, Eurystheus would not count it as one and assigned another.



Hercules and the Hydra

3. **To capture the Cerynithian Hind** who was sacred to the goddess Artemis. Hercules spent over a year trying to catch the deer with the golden antlers alive and finally brought it down with an arrow to the hoof. Even so, Artemis refused to allow him to take the deer - and would have killed him for hunting it - until she heard the story of his labors and let him go.



Hercules and the Cerynithian Hind- Deer with golden antler

4. **To capture the Erymanthian Boar.** This labor took Hercules to the land of the Centaurs, and the wine he had been given to attract the boar drew the centaurs to him. They attacked him and he had to kill many of them but brought the boar back alive to Eurystheus.

5. **Cleaning the Stables of Augeus** in a day. Eurystheus felt this side-adventure with the Argonauts was an unnecessary luxury on Hercules' part and so devised an impossible task for his next labor. The stables of King Augeus were immense and his herd vast, and there seemed to be no way for anyone to clean them in a month, let alone a day. Hercules said he would do it but made Augeus promise him a tenth of the herd if he succeeded. Augeus agreed since he knew he could not lose, but Hercules diverted two rivers to flow through the stables and clean them completely. Augeus then refused to honor the deal he had made. Hercules felt cheated and swore he would return and kill Augeus once he had completed his labors for Eurystheus. Eurystheus, however, told him he could receive no payment for his labors and that, by trying to profit, he had disqualified that labor and would have to do another to make up for it.

6. **To drive away the Stymphalian Birds** who were ravaging the countryside. He accomplished this with a rattle given to him by Athena. The rattle startled the birds who flew away, and Hercules shot them down with his arrows in flight.

7. **To bring back the Cretan Bull from Knossos.** The bull belonged to King Minos of Crete and was sacred to the god of the seas, Poseidon; accordingly, it could walk on water. Minos no longer wanted the bull because his wife had fallen in love with it and, in fact, had become pregnant by it (giving birth to the Minotaur), and so Minos happily gave the bull to Hercules who rode it across the sea from Crete to Athens and brought it to Eurystheus. The bull was then released and would cause further trouble throughout Attica until it was finally killed by Theseus.



Hercules and the Cretan Bull

8. **To bring back the Mares of Diomedes.** Diomedes was a Thracian king who fed his horses on a steady diet of human flesh so that no one could come near them. Hercules fed Diomedes to the horses and, when they were full, brought them back to Eurystheus. It was during this labor, either going to or coming from Diomedes' palace, that Hercules stopped to visit his old friend Admetus whose wife Alcestis had recently died. Hercules wrestled death for the soul of Alcestis and returned her to her husband.

9. **To bring back Hippolyte's Girdle.** Hippolyte was the queen of the Amazons, and her belt (girdle) was a symbol of her right to rule. The Amazons originally welcomed Hercules but Hera, disguised as one of them, spread a rumor that Hercules had come to kidnap the queen and enslave them. The women attacked Hercules and Hippolyte was killed in the fight; Hercules then took her belt and left. In another version of this story, however, no one dies; Hercules kidnaps Hippolyte's sister and ransoms her for the belt and then leaves peacefully. On his return voyage he has many other side-adventures, which further enrage Eurystheus, but he accepts the girdle as a legitimate labor.

10. To bring back the cattle of Geryon, king of Cadiz. Hercules had many side-adventures on this labor, including inadvertently building the Pillars of Hercules at Gibraltar and threatening to shoot the sun with his arrows for making him too hot. When he finally reached Cadiz (Spain), he had many problems rounding up the cattle, including having to chase down a bull (the herd had to be complete in order to be accepted for the labor). Bringing the cattle back to Greece, Hera sent gadflies to sting the beasts and scattered them, so Hercules had to round them up again. He finally brought the cattle back to Eurystheus who accepted the labor as legitimate.

11. To bring back the Golden Apples of Hesperides. On the way to the sacred grove where the apples grew, Hercules found Prometheus bound to a rock and set him free. Prometheus was grateful and told him that the apples were guarded by a dragon named Ladon who could not be conquered, and so Hercules should try to get the titan Atlas, who held up the earth and heavens on his shoulders, to get the apples for him.

When Hercules reached the grove, Atlas agreed to help, but Hercules would have to shoulder the weight of the world while Atlas went to get the apples. Hercules accepted the load and Atlas got the apples. When he returned, however, Atlas did not want to take the weight back and was going to leave Hercules in his place. Hercules cheerfully agreed to stay and hold up the universe but asked Atlas if he could take the weight again for just one moment so that he could adjust his cloak to cushion his shoulders. Atlas took back the universe and Hercules picked up the apples and left.



Atlas with the world on his shoulders

12. **To bring back Cerberus**, the guard dog of the underworld. For the last labor, Eurystheus decided on something he knew would be impossible: to bring back, alive, the three-headed dog who guarded the entrance to Hades. Before he could enter the underworld, Hercules had to become initiated in the Eleusinian Mysteries at the sacred city of Eleusis. He then journeyed to Hades, where he had further adventures in the underworld such as freeing his cousin Theseus from the Chair of Forgetfulness where he had been bound. Hercules was allowed by Hades to take Cerberus provided he did not hurt the dog. He wrestled Cerberus into submission and brought him back to Eurystheus who was so terrified of the animal that he told Hercules all the labors were done and to take the dog back to Hades.



Hercules and Cerberus

The Death of Hercules

Hercules wife found out about an indiscretion Hercules had been having with another woman, so she prepared a cloak by smearing it with poisoned blood from Nessus. She sent it to Hercules asking him to wear it when he offered up a burnt sacrifice to the gods, hoping it would bring him back to her.

Instead, when Hercules donned the poisoned cloak, it began to burn him, causing excruciating pain. Despite his efforts, Hercules was unable to remove the cloak. Hercules decided that death was preferable to continuing to suffer from this pain, so he had his friends build a funeral pyre on top of Mount Oeta; however, he was unable to find anybody who was willing to light the pyre.

Hercules then asked for help from the gods to end his life, and he received it. The Greek god Jupiter sent lightning to consume Hercules' mortal body.

Legacy

And so Hercules left the earth to live eternally among the gods and, through the stories of his adventures, to enjoy immortality down through the ages. His life was not always a happy one, even though he had a god for a father, and his daily struggles and relationships were not made any easier by his strength. Even though he was able to accomplish great deeds, this did not make him immune to those disappointments and dark times that are a part of the human experience.

The myths of Hercules show the world as it is: everyone has monsters they need to conquer and seemingly impossible tasks they are faced with and tragedies that seem too hard to bear. As it was in ancient Greece when people would sit and listen to the tales of the hero, so it has been ever since and, even in the modern day, comic books, graphic novels, books, television shows, and Hollywood films featuring Hercules continue to be popular. He remains a hero anyone can relate to, precisely because his life was so far from perfect and his character was less than ideal. When faced with some difficult situation in life, one can take comfort in the thought that, if Hercules could endure his sufferings, one can survive one's own.