

Helios, the Sun-God

The mythical story of Helios, the Sun-God
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The Myth of Helios, the Sun-God

The Greeks did not know that the earth was round. They believed that it was flat, and that the sun moved over it each day from east to west. They thought that each morning the goddess of the Dawn threw open the eastern gates of the sky, and the golden chariot of the sun rolled out. This was drawn by twelve swift horses, and was so brilliant that men's eyes could not bear to look at it. In the chariot stood the god Helios, with the rays of the sun flaming around his head.

It took great skill to drive the chariot on his long day's journey. Helios had to guide it with much care, so as not to drive too near the earth and scorch it. The way during the morning was up a steep ascent. At noon the chariot reached the summit of the course, and began to descend toward the west. The way then was rough, and the descent so steep that the horses were in danger of falling headlong. But the journey was always finished in safety, and the weary horses entered the gates of the Evening.

There were two beautiful palaces for Helios, one in the east at the gates of the Dawn, and the other in the west at the gates of the Evening. To get from his western palace back to his palace at the gates of the Dawn, Helios, with his horses and the chariot of the sun, was obliged to sail underneath the world during the night in a golden boat made by the god Hephaestus.



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Helios had a son named Phaethon, who wished greatly to drive the chariot of the sun, and begged his father to allow him to guide it for one day. The god at first refused, saying, -

"Only my hands are strong enough to drive those spirited horses upon that dangerous road."

But Phaethon would not be denied. He begged until at last his father consented. Helios placed the young man in the flaming chariot, and fastened the burning rays of the sun around his forehead. Then, as Dawn opened the eastern gates, the horses sprang forward. But they soon felt that their master's hands were not upon the reins. Phaethon was much too weak to guide the twelve strong horses. They dashed from the track downward toward the earth, setting fire to mountain-tops and forests, and boiling the water in the rivers and brooks. Then they whirled up among the stars, burning them, and setting the very heavens on fire.

When Helios saw what terrible mischief was being done, he begged Zeus for aid. To save the world from being destroyed, Zeus hurled a mighty thunderbolt at Phaethon, which struck him, and knocked him headlong from the sky. Then he sent a great rain, which lasted many days. Finally, when the flames were out, the gods saw how great the damage was. Whole countries were left bare and blackened; and though the plants soon began to grow again almost everywhere, some places are still barren to this day. And some races of men were so scorched by the great heat that the color of their skins has remained black or brown ever since.