Mythology: Recurring Topics

When reading through the myths, take note of how they deal with some of the following recurring topics:

1. **Political/Geographical Origins (Etiology)**: Some myths were early history, explaining the naming or founding of cities and natural formations (seas, mountains, etc.)
2. **Early Science (Etiology)**: Myths often offered explanations of natural phenomena (seasons, sunrise, sunset, constellations, flowers, etc.)
3. **Wickedness of killing family**: Even if the crime was unintentional, those guilty of this crime would be punished in some way and/or would have to be cleansed in some way, especially if it involved the killing of a mother or father.
4. **Obligation to avenge family's murder**: We see this in myths where the murder of a family member, particularly a father or mother, must be avenged.
5. **Burying the dead**: If they weren't buried properly, their souls would not be allowed entrance to underworld, and they would wander the earth aimlessly
6. **Showing hospitality**: Safe travel required the help of other people, so across Greece, hospitality was a highly sacred obligation. Failure to show hospitality or to break the sacred bond of host and guest was often punished by the gods.
7. **Fate**: Many myths show the consequences of trying to avert one's fate (i.e. when attempting to change it actually fulfills it). For this topic, look for myths in which someone receives a prophecy and tries to keep it from coming true. This applies to gods as well as mortals.
8. **Hubris**: hubris is excessive pride, especially when mortals compared themselves with the gods or foolishly tried to achieve something beyond their abilities (in spite of warnings).
9. **Foolish promises**: Almost any time a god promises something and swears by the river Styx, there are disastrous consequences.
10. **Gods in disguise, testing mortals**: The gods often take the appearance of mortals in order to test their moral goodness or heroic ability.
11. **Warnings, rewards, or assistance from the gods**: Gods try to guide or reward mortals, often by directly appearing to them or sending messages through oracles.
12. **Peril of the gods' "love"**: Whenever a mortal is seduced by a god or goddess, it almost never ends well for the mortal, who eventually
    1. dies tragically
    2. changes form (into a tree, river, flower, etc.)
    3. is exiled
13. **Wickedness of human sacrifice**: Human sacrifice here is defined as the ceremonial killing of a human to appease a god. The later Greeks hated the idea of human sacrifice, but many myths included this horrific practice, so these stories were changed:
    1. into stories of a youth's tragic death (commemorated by a flower or other plant)
    2. into a murderous crime
    3. into a story of rescue

    To identify this, look for the death or near-death of a youth, especially at the hands of a god.
14. **The gods' jealousy or vengeance**: The gods were often very cruel, vicious, and unjust in their punishment of lesser beings like minor gods or mortals.
15. **Heroic ability**
    - The hero of a culture always reveals what that culture values in its people.
    - Always analyze a hero's abilities and ask yourself, "What does this reveal about the Greeks that they would consider these abilities heroic? What did they value?"

Many of these topics are central stories that were intended to teach the ancient Greeks how to behave in society or how to respond to life and the universe. They reveal much about what the ancient Greeks believed and valued.