

2017

The Justice of the Gods in Homer and the Early Greek Plays

Nathanael Jones

Southern Adventist University, najones@southern.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/jiur>

Recommended Citation

Jones, Nathanael (2017) "The Justice of the Gods in Homer and the Early Greek Plays," *Journal of Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Research*: Vol. 9 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://knowledge.e.southern.edu/jiur/vol9/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Peer Reviewed Journals at KnowledgeExchange@Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Interdisciplinary Undergraduate Research* by an authorized editor of KnowledgeExchange@Southern. For more information, please contact jspears@southern.edu.

The Justice of the Gods in Homer and the Early Greek Plays

The ancient stories of Greek gods often seem inconsistent. What Sophocles writes as fate, Homer might write as the gods; in one story Zeus is aloof and distant, while in another he might care intimately about the characters. This inconsistency often colors the gods as fickle, narcissistic rogues. When one takes into account, however, the different perspective of ancient Greek culture, the human characteristics of the Greek gods, and their lack of obligation to mortals, what is left is a picture of godly justice that is appropriately humanistic and aloof. Maria Kip writes in “The Gods of the *Iliad* and the Fate of Troy,” “The poet needed these gods to open the way for our pity and our awareness of the human condition. When we try to make them just and moralistic in spite of their creator, we dehumanize his poem” (402). I believe contrary to this, however, that when we understand the justice of the Greek gods through the lens of ancient Greek society, we do not dehumanize Homer, but rather, we humanize the gods who become tools to further understand both Homer and the human condition.

On the campus of a Christian university, often there can be a blatant lack of perspective. Because Christian beliefs are so often based largely on faith, sometimes even in the face of adversity and science, Christians tend to develop a strong defensive nature that renders itself impervious to the adoption of different perspectives, even for the sake of study and growth. Because of this, even when Christianity is not under attack, exercises that would normally expand the mind to the nature of humanity and God can devolve into an endless spiral of Christian affirmation and apology. This fear-driven response can deaden the mind to new ideas, which might otherwise enlighten and enhance the Christian worldview and act as a tool for discovering and questioning our own assumptions.

Once the courage is found to move beyond the bounds of one's own opinion, a whole new world is opened up. The Greeks have no story of Godly revelation like that of God to Abraham, Noah, or Moses. The Greek gods cannot have perfect personalities, because the Greeks had no perfect model on which to base the personalities of the gods. The Greek gods were supernatural in their power and longevity, because the Greeks could observe through storm, and wave, and death, a power and finality that were beyond themselves. They concluded that these powers must be divine. The Greek gods were so inseparable from their power that, "Where we say, 'it rains' or 'it snows,' the Greek said 'he rains' or 'he snows'" (Webb 155). But because the chief attribute of divinity was power, other divine traits were more problematical for the Greek authors.

There was no Christ with which to model a God whose very character and spirit surpassed that of humanity. "In primitive times it was the awfulness of nature which impressed itself on the imaginations of the inhabitants. In the early stages of development the mind of man tends to gloomy forms of religion: his ignorance and comparative helplessness tend to fill his brain with spiritual terrors and forebodings" (Middleton 282). As a result, Olympus was populated by a race of supernatural beings that mimicked human needs, feelings, and politics even while they dwarfed human power. So then the question of godly justice for the Greeks must be compared to human justice, since human justice is the only justice known to them. This Greek vision of the gods is a significant shift from Christianity, where the justice of God far surpasses that of humanity, but this mental shift is necessary in accurately ascertaining the justice of the Greek gods.

Another key difference in the gods of Olympus is their prevalent but excusable indifference to humanity. Often it seems that the very purpose of the Christian God is His catering to humanity. From creation, to revelation, to salvation, the very heart of the Bible is wrapped up in God's obsession with human happiness. This obsession is not the obsession of the gods in ancient Greece. The motive of the

Greek gods was not salvation, and even their revelation can be seen as a man-made explanation for the intricacies of life and nature. As metaphors for things observed but not understood, the gods owe nothing to humanity, and do them a service in their aloofness. The Greeks could be thankful that the avatars for thunder and hurricane and death rarely meddled in the lives of men. However, the Greeks noticed the fickleness of wind and the arbitrary nature of death, and so they gave these avatars those respective attributes. The gods of Greece were not beholden to man, and had no significant motivation to care about their plight. So the justice of the Greek gods cannot be related to the just or unjust nature of the plight of man, but is rather a question of whether or not the gods, in their isolated dealings with mortals, demonstrate the justice expected of the Greeks themselves.

The Greek gods were ascended above humanity in much the same way as man could be considered ascended above primates. The gods had massively increased powers of mind and resource, but their morality was often little better than their mortal counterparts. Lacking a true divine subject to replicate in his writing, Homer created the gods in the image of man. As Anderson states, the gods “exhibit traits and feelings which are decidedly human” (392).

This assertion answers many questions raised by the actions of the gods. In the *Iliad* the gods are watching the mortal Trojan War with great interest, much like sports fans of the modern era. They have a favorite team and they want to influence the odds in their favor. Homer writes an epic with two sentient societies: a common human world inside a larger superhuman utopia. “When the gods match against each other at the battle Zeus laughs, when Achaeans build the wall, Poseidon gets jealous and angry so that he is not offered any hecatomb, and when Ares and Aphrodite are wounded, they run to Zeus to complain as well as to get sympathy of him” (Yilmaz 3).

Homer writes the gods into life, and the gods write the terms of morality, both for themselves

and also for humanity. “As the head of all the gods, Zeus’s will is the ultimate law since he is the monarch and acknowledged. Like a mayor in the human world each of the gods rules a region with their certain rules and responsibilities. Therefore, as G. M. A. Grube claims all the gods ‘have to respect each other’s right and powers’ because Zeus is the final authority” (Yilmaz 3). Because the gods are held accountable by Zeus, they enforce similar morality among men by demanding “strict adherence to oaths, proper regard for and mercy to suppliants, respect for the aged and for the dead, and obedience to the gods” (Yilmaz, 3).

Because of this higher enforcement from Zeus and the lesser gods, the societies of both man and god leaned heavily toward justice. But the gods are never depicted as perfect, no matter how powerful they may be. They are often polar depictions of human emotion, and as such can reflect immorality or injustice by being true to their very nature, which is no true injustice. As Kullman reiterates in “Gods and Men In the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*,” “The poet of the *Iliad* interprets the world by taking the passions of the gods to be the determining factors of what happens on the human level. This is quite independent of the respective moral qualities of these passions” (3).

In the *Odyssey*, by Homer, in lines 25 and 26, the narrator tells us that all the gods pitied Odysseus except for Poseidon who “stormed” against him. Through the voice of Zeus, Homer explains by saying, in line 75, that it was “because Odysseus blinded his son the Cyclopes.” This explanation seems like a just reaction, a reaction that would have been expected from any Greek whose son was killed in battle. This kind of revenge is laced into almost every Greek story. It is a deeply rooted characteristic in Greek culture, and so can be expected to manifest in the Greek gods as well.

Aeschylus, in *Agamemnon*, tells a story of human sacrifice, meant to satiate the desires of Artemis, goddess of the forest. Before the Greeks could successfully embark on the conquest of Troy,

Artemis demands that Agamemnon sacrifice his daughter for fair winds and safe passage. This sacrifice seems barbaric and inhuman until, in line 135, Artemis pities the Trojans because they will be destroyed. In lines 140-144 Aeschylus remarks about the typical kindness of Artemis and how out of character this demand is for her. It is interesting to note that this demand prompted by the pity of Artemis is the only deterrent that forces the Greeks to think about the repercussions of the war that they've pledged themselves to, for the Trojan War is not prompted by assassination, or even rape, but by the consensual love of a queen and a foreign prince. It could be said that Artemis did not desire the death of Agamemnon's daughter, but rather peace. The death of his daughter was the price that Artemis demanded of Agamemnon for his own bloodlust and pride. She did not do the deed. She did not even threaten judgment were Agamemnon to give up his war and forgo the sacrifice. For Agamemnon, the war was worth the life of his daughter. This gruesome fact must have been known well by the Greeks, and has not been lost on scholars. R.P. Winnington-Ingram writes in "The Role of Apollo in the *Oresteia*" that those who saw the play would "Remember that Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter, unjustifiably, to his own pride and ambition" (99). The harm that many attribute to Artemis is actually the result of Agamemnon's choice. The gods are innocent of the sins of man.

Sophocles, in *Oedipus*, tells the story of a king and queen who desperately try to escape their fate. Because of a prophecy of Apollo, foretelling the death of the king at the hands of the king's son, the king and queen give their son to a servant with orders to kill him. The servant does not go through with the murder, and later, that son, Oedipus, tries to escape another prophecy foretelling that he would kill his father and marry his mother. All of these things come to pass. It is vital to note that Apollo is the god of truth; truth is part of his very nature. Just as Hades accepts the dead, and Zeus sends the rain, so Apollo prophesies. He is as just in prophesying as the sun is in shining. In this case his prophecies tell of doom, even though in other stories they tell of success. In this case they reveal flaws in the character of a

king and queen who are willing to kill their own child to avoid their own demise, and through that revelation, self-fulfill the very prophecy they are trying to escape. As he fully realizes his misery, Oedipus himself says in lines 1518-1520, after previously blaming everything on Apollo, “I in my wretchedness struck me, no one else did.” Apollo does not force the incest of Oedipus or the murder of his father; he merely prophesies that it will happen. The tragedy of the play is due to the innocence of the characters. Oedipus does not do anything wrong, but neither does Apollo, by Oedipus’ own admission. If anything, the blame can be laid at the feet of the queen and king.

These are some of the most misunderstood stories, attributing undue malice to the gods, but there are many stories of the unprovoked benevolence of the gods as well. Athena is often guilty of unprovoked benevolence. In the words of T. K. Ntaidou, “Athena, the beloved goddess of the Athenians whose monumental temple of the Parthenon was located on the Athenian Acropolis, poured sleep in the eyelids of Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, to make her sleep and to relieve her sorrow for her missing husband. In another tale, the wise virgin goddess helped Hercules to kill the giant Alcioneus by asking Hypnos to hypnotise the giant” (23). Occasionally the gods pity humanity in their trials and offer them aid. Another example is that of Apollo in the *Oresteia* when he “Temporarily alleviated Orestes from the menace of the Erinnyes (Furies) by making them sleep” (23).

Often, as is the case with Paris’ judgment of the goddesses, or Calypso’s love of Odysseus, mortals might find themselves in hard positions, but these situations too emulate typical Greek life, situations where sometimes there is no right answer, and enemies are made, or someone’s pride is slighted without that being the intention of the perpetrator. Through careful study it becomes clear that the Greek gods were subject to the same cycles of revenge and politics that the Greeks found themselves trapped in as well. However, in the vast majority of circumstances the gods behave in a way that would be just and appropriate in a Greek. In “Divine Justice and Cosmic Order in Early Greek Epic,” William

Allan asserts that, “Morality is essentially a system of norms and protocols governing relationships between individuals, and a similar system is shown to apply on both the divine and human levels” (1).

Once the relative justice of the Greek gods is understood, the literary ramifications are far reaching. This new perspective provides a new, clearer lens with which one may read the Greek classics. The ways of the gods are no longer unknowable. Instead they become familiar. Once the gulf between mortal and immortal has been breached, and we see the gods as humans thinly veiled in power, we can accurately understand and question the ways of the gods in context. What must it be like to live in utter safety from physical pain or death? This feeling of safety may be what often caused the gods to be as mischievous as men. It may explain the constant infidelity and petty disputes that seem to eternally glaze Olympian culture. The gods cannot truly understand the wars of men, because there is nothing to suggest that the gods really understand mortality. For a man to cease to exist may in fact seem a mercy to beings who do not have the luxury of danger to sweeten their lives or death to sharpen their loves.

Understanding the perspective of the Greek gods also opens the door to a better understanding of ourselves. In examining through the utopia of the gods the best that ancient man can dream, the fallen nature of humanity is made clear. Natural man cannot even dream a reality that is truly happy or fulfilling. Even in the sphere of gods man has only the power to fantasize about the fulfillment of physical needs. Man requires food and drink, so he gave the gods ambrosia and nectar. Man fears death, so he gave the gods immortality. Man does not understand the infinite, so he gave the gods a beginning. Man does not like being injured, so the gods are rarely hurt. Man likes beauty and power, so he gave both to the gods in spades. A truly healthy depiction of a godly relationship however, is exceedingly rare. The gods have countless years to bond; yet they persist in intense dysfunction. The gods of ancient Greece were not unjust, but were only crude gods resurrected by, and reflections of the crude understandings of ancient man.

The morality of man is profoundly flawed. Thus imperfect behavior is not relegated to the realm of mortals, and the immortals of Greek myth constantly wrong each other as well. Aphrodite cheats on her ugly husband Hephaestus, Zeus is chronically unfaithful to Hera, and Hades kidnaps Persephone for himself. All of these examples point to a crude survival of the fittest version of justice that man was struggling to escape from during the era of the ancient Greeks. The gods of Greece are just, but only as just as the society that created them.

In “The Message of Greek Religion to Christianity Today,” Arthur Fairbanks posits, “the belief in an essential unity between the nature of God and the nature of man lies at the root of every form of religion” (120). While both the Christian and ancient Greek religions operate on a belief in supposed just and immortal deities, the Greek religion rings hollow through its failed portrayal of perfection. The Greeks worshiped “humanity in and through its gods” (Fairbanks 120).

The justice of the Christian God utterly eclipses that of carnal men and man-made gods because the Christian God initiates the reconciliation of mortal and immortal as seen over and over in the Bible, whether it be God’s call to Abraham in Ur, the calling of Moses through a burning bush, or God’s call to all of humanity through the Incarnation of Christ. The justice of the Christian God transcends that of the *Iliad* because it finds its origins in the mind of the Divine. As evidenced by the mythology of Greece, no real salvation or true justice can come from the mind of man. The Biblical system of selfless probity that stands in such stark contrast to that of fallen man could not have come from fallen man. Only the truly Divine could break the crude morality of ancient man and reveal true perfection.

It is fascinating to note that the Greek religion does have one striking similarity with religions like Christianity and Islam that many other modern systems of belief lack. They looked at the world around them, and concluded that the divine was active in the life of man. They saw the same nature that

was “red in tooth and claw” and still concluded that there were greater sympathetic forces at work (Tennyson). As Fairbanks states, “In so far as we practically fail to lay hold on a god of human sympathies as the fundamental fact of life, we have much to learn from Greece” (120).

After considering the different perspective of the Greeks, the human characteristics of the Greek gods, and their lack of obligation to mortals, the relative justice of the Greek gods is confirmed. Through the study of the Greek gods, their human nature, and their stark contrast to the Biblical God, the clearly supernatural nature of the Christian God is revealed. A God who takes such a loving interest in humanity, and whose character and actions are often far removed from what is naturally seen in humanity, must be a product of His own revelation to man, and not merely a convenient answer to unanswered questions.

Works Cited

- Aeschylus. *Agamemnon*. From "*The Oresteia*". Trans. Robert Fagles. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981. Print.
- Allan, William. "Divine Justice and Cosmic Order in Early Greek Epic." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* *J. Hell. Stud.* 126 (2006): 1-35. Web.
- Anderson, W. L. "Of Gods and Men in the *Iliad*", *College English* 14, 7, April, 1953, 391-395.
- Fairbanks, Arthur. "The Message of Greek Religion to Christianity Today." *The Biblical World* 29.2 (1907): 111-20. Web.
- Homer. *Odyssey*. Trans. Stanley Lombardo. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co, 2000. Print.
- Kip, A. Maria Van Erp Taalman. "The Gods of the *Iliad* and the Fate of Troy." *Mnemosyne* 53.4 (2000): 385-402. Web.
- Kullmann, Wolfgang. "Gods and Men in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 89 (1985): 1. Web.
- Middleton, J. Henry. "The Temple of Apollo at Delphi." *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 9 (1888): 282. Web.
- Ntaidou, T. K., and I. I. Siempos. "The Art of Providing Anaesthesia in Greek Mythology." *Anaesthesia & Intensive Care* 40. (2012): 22-27. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 11 May 2016.
- Sophocles, Robert Bagg, and James Scully. *The Complete Plays of Sophocles: a New Translation*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2011. Print.
- Tennyson, Alfred. In Memoriam A.H.H. *Online-literature.com*. N. p., 2017. Web. 1 Mar. 2017.

Webb, Chris A. "Greek, Roman, Hebrew, and Byzantine Interpretations of Light and its Origins." *Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 54.1-4 (2009): 155-167. *Academic Search Complete*. Web. 28 Apr. 2016.

Winnington-Ingram, R. P.. "The Rôle of Apollo in the *Oresteia*". *The Classical Review* 47.3 (1933): 97–104. Web.

Yilmaz, Tuncer. "Representation of the Gods in the *Iliad* By Homer: A Brief Analysis." *Journal Of Suleyman Demirel University Institute Of Social Sciences* 15.1 (2012): 1. *Publisher Provided Full Text Searching File*. Web. 11 May 2016