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The Role of the Greek Gods and Yahweh: Emotions or Morals?

by Heather Merrick

In most major religions today, high moral principles are established in religious doctrines. Believers are expected to worship their god and follow set standards which the church or god has established. Christians, for example, attempt to comply with the Ten Commandments; according to the Christian god, human beings are not supposed to commit adultery, lie, or covet their neighbor's wealth. Christians follow a specific text, the Bible, to know how to live a life that will lead toward an eternal life in heaven. The Homeric Greeks did not follow a set of standards that told them how to act; the gods did not play a role in determining moral etiquette. The Homeric Greeks believed they were ruled by immortals who determined the destinies of those Greeks who helped or hindered their goals as gods.

In Homer's *Iliad*, the characters believed in their gods and trusted in the belief that they could persuade the gods to help them by appealing to their emotions. Since the people believed their gods were humanlike, they could be confident that the gods would feel sorry, or angry, or pleased, and would want to help them. The people depended on this persuasive power. The gods ruled according to how they felt toward individuals, rather than on a set standard of rules.

In *The Iliad*, the gods have nothing to do with morals; "the rain falls alike upon the just and the unjust" (Guthrie 7). The gods' actions are controlled by the same motivations as the humans': anger, revenge, love, pity, and fear. The gods quarrel among themselves like children, each god demanding his own way. In *The Iliad*, Akhilleus [Achilles] felt he had been dishonored when Agamemnon took his mistress, Briseis. Akhilleus prayed to his mother, Thetis, and asked her to approach Zeus and ask him to "help the Trojans, / and pin the Achaians back against the ships and the water, / dying" (70). Thetis did as her son asked, and Zeus agreed to help the Trojans. Thetis was able to persuade Zeus by making him feel sorry for her and empathize with her. She said, "Bend your head and promise me to accomplish this thing, / or else refuse it, you have nothing to fear, that I may know / by how much I am the most dishonored of all gods" (72-73). Zeus agreed to help because he

pitied Thetis and felt obligated to help her, not because he felt that it was morally right to defend the Trojans.

Zeus had trouble deciding if he should do as Thetis asked because Hera was questioning his actions. Zeus tells Thetis:

*This is a disastrous matter when you set me in conflict
with Hera, and she troubles me with recriminations.
Since even as things are, forever among the immortals
she is at me and speaks of how I can help the Trojans in battle.
Even so, go back again now, go away, for fear she
see us. I will look to these things that they may be accomplished.*

(73)

Here Zeus shows the humanlike characteristics of a brow-beaten husband. He does not want to make Hera angry, yet he reveals his compassion for Thetis when he agrees to help her. Zeus proclaims that he can side with the Trojans because he is the strongest, most powerful god, and none of the others can challenge his authority successfully. In these passages he demonstrates the human qualities of compassion, anxiety, and confidence.

Zeus revealed another side of himself when he was watching the battle with Hera. He knew that his son, Sarpedon, would die if he did not intervene, but he also knew that if he helped his son, the other gods would pull their sons out of battle and the disagreements among the gods would increase. Zeus told Hera:

*The heart in my breast is balanced between the two ways as I ponder,
whether I should snatch him out of the sorrowful battle
and set him down still alive in the rich country of Lykia,
or beat him under at the hands of the son of Menoitios.*

(342)

Hera told Zeus to stay out of the battle, and he agreed that Hera's choice was the best. As he watched the battle, he "wept tears of blood that fell to the ground, for the sake / of his beloved son, whom now Patroklos was presently / to kill" (342). This passage shows that Zeus loved his son and felt sorrow at his coming death.

Another emotion that Zeus revealed was anger. Hera tricked Zeus into sleeping with her to distract him while Poseidon helped the Achaians. When Zeus discovered what had happened, he was furious with Hera. He told her:

*Hopeless one, it was your evil design, your treachery, Hera,
that stayed brilliant Hektor from battle, terrified his people.
I do not know, perhaps for this contrivance of evil
and pain you will win first reward when I lash you with whip strokes.*

(309)

Zeus reminded Hera of the last time she had gone against him—how he had tortured her in front of the other gods, and how none of the gods could help her. Hera was fearful after Zeus spoke, and she told Zeus of Poseidon's pity for the Trojans. Zeus spared her from the beating. He showed both his anger and his compassion when Hera tricked him.

In the Bible, the Yahwistic god is also an emotional immortal, but emotions are not at the center of his leadership. In the story of the tower of Babel, the men decided to build a tall tower that would bring them closer to God. According to God's rules, the people were not allowed to approach the divinity of God, so God punished them by mixing their languages so they could not understand each other. In this story, God reacted out of anger; however, the story is important in the Bible not because God got angry, but because it shows today's Biblical believers that they should not try to elevate themselves to the level of God.

Another instance in the Bible where God portrays emotions is in the story of Abraham and his son, Isaac. Abraham and his wife have a son late in life. Abraham, a faithful follower, praises God for this precious gift of life. When Isaac is twenty, God tells Abraham to sacrifice him. Abraham loves Isaac, but feels that God must be obeyed. He takes Isaac to the sacrificing block and is ready to sacrifice him. God is testing Abraham's loyalty; when Abraham shows this loyalty, God sends an angel to stop the sacrifice. This story centers on Abraham's loyalty rather than God's compassion. The story teaches followers to trust and obey God to receive His blessing.

The primary purpose of Biblical stories is to teach religious followers lessons on how to live their lives. God's rules do not change according to God's moods; instead, moral principles are established in the Bible and do not change. In Greek mythology, changes are constant and the followers are not told that any action is always right or wrong. The gods of Homer's time differ from the Yahwistic god because Homeric gods constantly change their minds as their emotions for humans change. Part of this difference exists because the Greek gods fight among themselves; the single Yahwistic god is not challenged by any other forces because there are no forces as great as God's. There was dissent among the Greek gods that did not exist for the Yahwistic god.

The Greek gods, in fact, were constantly fighting among themselves. Poseidon felt sorry for the Achaians, so he helped them in spite of Zeus's orders that the gods stay out of the war. Poseidon proclaimed that he had as much right to decide what he wanted to do as Zeus did because both of them were sons of Titans. Poseidon was angry that the Achaians were being treated poorly in battle; he felt that they deserved to do well,

so he led the Achaians. He told the people, "I myself will lead the way, and I think that no longer / Hektor, Priam's son, can stand up to us, for all his fury" (304). Poseidon showed that his feelings for the people were more important to him than Zeus's orders; his actions were guided by the love and pity he felt toward the Achaians.

Hera also showed that her emotions affected her decisions. She was fearful of Zeus when she tricked him, yet she was brave enough to attempt it. She was not afraid to stand up to Zeus because she was quick-tempered and confident, but she was fearful when Zeus was angry. Athene also defended the Achaians against the will of Zeus. Hephaistos made armor for Akhilleus to wear when Thetis asked him. He told Thetis, "And I wish that I could hide him [Akhilleus] away from death and its sorrow" (387). The gods had differing opinions as to how the battle on earth should progress. This caused an internal conflict among the gods, so the final result was that the people could help persuade different gods by appealing to their emotions. A set code of moral conduct was not established. Instead of defining right and wrong, the Greek gods willfully, and almost capriciously, determined the destinies of man.

The ancient Greek gods led the people according to how each god felt. The gods, then, had moral characters beset by many of the same frailties that humans possessed (Guthrie 4). The gods approached the level of Greek men because there was an element of human nature in them, not a hint of the divine in man (Guthrie 5). The gods had humanlike bodies and could walk among men and women. This was shown when Poseidon entered the war and led the Achaians into battle. In Book V, Ares entered the battle and killed a man, not through directing an arrow that a man had shot, but by shooting the man himself (Willcock 66).

The Greek pantheon was modeled after the hierarchial structure of Greek society. According to that warlike aristocracy, gods and men "together formed one society, organized on a basis of strongly marked distinctions, as was human society itself" (Guthrie 3). The highest class of aristocrats, however, was the gods. In *The Iliad*, the gods were on a higher level than humans, so the people did not have the right to criticize the gods. If Akhilleus was dissatisfied with Zeus because he did not want to see his friends die, it was not appropriate for Akhilleus to tell Zeus he was wrong. On the other hand, if Hera disagreed with Zeus for siding with the Trojans, she could confront him because she had similar powers in dealing with men. This was analogous to the structure of Greek society; Akhilleus could criticize Agamemnon, one of the other leaders, but if Thersites, of lower rank, tried to do the same, he would be punished (Guthrie 3). The gods were sensitive to criticism by

man. It was best for man not to face the wrath of the god he offended.

Certain faults, such as stealing, were unsuited to the nobility, primarily because they detracted from its dignity; yet the nobility (both god and human) was not expected to be fault-free. They did not approve of petty fraud that was beneath their dignity, but they would not hesitate to stoop to unfairness or deceit if it suited their purposes (Guthrie 3). This was shown in *The Iliad* when Agamemnon felt at liberty to take any woman he wished from the lower orders. It was his right since he was from a kingly line, and so it was socially acceptable to sleep with "lower" women. The gods were placed higher than men, so the sexual promiscuity of the gods was also permissible; it was not morally wrong for the gods to sleep with any mortal they chose. If a god chose a mortal to sleep with, it was an honor for that mortal to have been selected. When a woman gave birth to a son of a god, that son was one of the most respected of all men and was expected to be stronger and smarter than men that were of human origins. In *The Iliad*, Akhilleus was stronger than other men because he was Zeus's son. The gods did not have to be morally responsible for any situation that they found themselves in because they had the right to do as they pleased, according to the hierarchical structure of society.

On the other hand, the gods were influenced by worship and praise. Humans could help create favorable conditions for themselves by praying to the gods, sacrificing, and offering gifts and holding ceremonies in honor of the gods. These acts could influence the gods to the point of changing individual destinies. The gods were easily influenced and could be persuaded to change their minds in an instant.

The Biblical God was also affected by events such as sacrificial acts, but the people had to follow specific guidelines that God had sent. Believers could not worship graven images, commit adultery, or worship any other god besides Yahweh.

In the Bible, God was also sensitive to human criticism. God told Noah that he should build an ark because God was going to flood the land. The people were not following God's orders; they were not worshipping their Lord and they were living in "sin." Noah was told to put his family and friends on the ark, but the people mocked Noah and would not listen to him. God rewarded Noah for obeying orders and punished those that mocked him by flooding the land and destroying all life outside the ark. God was above all else; if the people did not realize and accept this, they were punished. God's sensitivity in the Bible was different than the Greek gods' sensitivities, however, because God acted on a set standard that did not change; the Greeks did not have a set standard that all of the people could follow because they had to please all of the gods

all of the time to escape wrath.

The main role of the gods in *The Iliad* was to explain the wins and losses in the battle between the Trojans and the Achaians. The gods decided which men were fated to die and which were to live as heroes of their people. The reason the Trojans were victorious in the beginning of the epic was because Zeus had agreed to help the Trojans and pin back the Achaians, not because the Trojans were militarily superior. The gods defended the men that they pitied or loved, and killed the men who angered them. When Hektor was slaughtering men, he escaped death because a god was protecting him. Diomedes, an Achaian, called out to Hektor after Hektor had been wounded:

*Once again you escaped death, you dog. And yet the evil
came near you, but now once more Phoibos Apollo has saved you,
he to whom you must pray when you go into the thunder of spears thrown.
Yet I may win you, if I encounter you hereafter,
if beside me also there is some god who will help me*
(244)

The Greeks were empowered and inspired to grow because of their religion. They made their own decisions as to what was right and what was wrong, and prayed to the gods for support in their endeavors. They did not count on the gods to determine how they should live, or if it was proper to sleep with another man's wife; they did depend on the gods to support them in battle in *The Iliad*. The Bible established a code of conduct and told the people how to live. The people had the power to choose how they wanted to live, but they knew where their decisions would lead according to God's word. Today, the Biblical religions have a set standard of what is right and what is wrong. The goal is now to live a life according to God so that each individual can live eternally. Rather than pleasing God for the purpose of succeeding on earth, the Biblical faithful are striving to live eternally. To the Greeks, the gods were the forces that protected or harmed them. The Greeks had freedom and power to change the decisions of the gods; they were allowed to develop and grow as humans.

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