



Of Gods and Men: The Theology of *The Iliad*

Homer's *Iliad* is a deeply spiritual work, with the actions of the gods and their dealings with men forming a large portion of the story. There is a hierarchy of supernatural beings, beginning at the bottom with the minor rivers, nymphs and such, and ending at the top with the "powerful son of Kronos", Zeus. This god is mysterious in many ways, but most especially in the question of his power. Is Zeus omnipotent or not? While it is not explicitly stated, and though some episodes in the *Iliad* seem on the surface to deny this, I believe that Homer shows us Zeus as truly omnipotent, while at the same time allowing the free will of other gods and men to change the way in which his ultimate will is carried out.

To be all powerful, one must be able to do what one wills. Homer says at the very beginning of the *Iliad* that "the will of Zeus was accomplished since that time when first there stood in division of conflict / Atreus' son the lord of men and brilliant Achilles".¹ Almost immediately, the *Iliad* makes clear that the following events are ultimately Zeus' will. Zeus himself says of himself, in Book 1, that "nothing I do shall be vain nor revocable / nor a thing unfulfilled when I bend my head in assent to it".² Later, in Book 8, Zeus describes his great power to the other gods and says, "So much stronger am I than the gods, and stronger than mortals".³ No one challenges these words; on the contrary they stay "stricken to



Jacques-Louis David,
The Anger of Achilles, 1819.

silence", evidently acknowledging the truth of this statement by their lack of protest.⁴

There are a number of figures in the *Iliad* whose behavior, consciously or not, provides proof of Zeus' omnipotence. On several occasions, another of the gods will act in disobedience to Zeus' commands, but ultimately end up forwarding his plan for the destruction of Troy. The actions of Poseidon, younger brother of Zeus, exemplify this in Books 13–15. When Zeus, who has been giving the upper hand to the Trojans, looks away from the battle, Poseidon comes to the aid of the Greeks.⁵ This is in direct opposition to his elder brother's earlier command at the beginning of Book 8, "any one I perceive . . . attempting to go among the Trojans and help them, or among the Danaans . . . shall go whipped against his dignity back to Olympos".⁶ Poseidon rashly disobeys in the face of this threat, and Zeus, when he notices, threatens immediate retribution unless the former withdraws from the battle.⁷ Yet even in his disobedience, he is furthering Zeus' plan,

for "not utterly did [Zeus] wish the Achaian people to be destroyed before Ilion".⁸ By helping the Greeks, Poseidon is unintentionally doing the will of the omnipotent Zeus.

Were Poseidon truly the equal of Zeus, as he claims, saying "[Zeus] has said too much, / if he will force me against my will, me, who am his equal / in rank", it seems unlikely that he would, almost immediately afterward, accede to his brother's order to leave the battle.⁹

He tells Zeus' messenger that "this time I will give way, from all my vexation", and though he adds that "there will be no more healing of our anger" if Zeus should act against the will of the other gods, the words seem more of an empty threat in the face of his actual capitulation.¹⁰

Another contender against Zeus is his wife and sister, Hera. She mutinously attempts to thwart his will on several occasions through the *Iliad*, but in the end her husband's omnipotence prevails. In Book 14, Homer says that Hera "looked out with her eyes, and saw at once how Poseidon . . . was bustling about the battle where men win glory, and her heart was happy".¹¹ She decides to seduce Zeus, in an effort to blind him from the actions of Poseidon, even though "in her eyes [Zeus] was hateful".¹² She seems to succeed at first, but her triumph is short-lived. When first she comes to him, Zeus behaves in a manner calculated more to irritate than to propitiate Hera, listing several of the women with whom he had previously had affairs.¹³ This does not

appear at first to make sense, unless one recalls Zeus' omnipotence and, by extension, omniscience. If Zeus already knows of Hera's intentions, his words to her make perfect sense, being a type of dramatic irony combined with a certain amusement as she endeavors to deceive him. In addition, once the two have slept together, Zeus awakes, wrings an apology from his wife, and sends other gods to return human events to the state in which he wishes them to be.¹⁴ Thus, Hera's bid for control is a failure, as she herself admits to the other deities: "Fools, we who try to work against Zeus, thoughtlessly . . . he is pre-eminently the greatest in power and strength. Therefore each of you must take whatever evil he sends you".¹⁵ Even Hera must admit the omnipotence of Zeus, however much she may wish to deny it.

The only real threat to Zeus' omnipotence is in the story of Thetis' rescue of the former from the anger of the other gods.¹⁶ Achilles reminds his mother, Thetis, that

you only among the immortals / beat aside shameful destruction from Kronos' son the dark-misted, that time when all the other Olympians sought to bind him, / Hera and Poseidon and Pallas Athene. Then you, / goddess, went and set him free from his shackles.¹⁷

While this does not at first seem like evidence of Zeus' power, it must be read in light of the later words of Thetis to "Father Zeus" only a few pages after.¹⁸ She goes to him to present her son's plea, and Zeus sits silently, neither consenting to nor denying her request.¹⁹ Thetis becomes more urgent and says, "Bend your head and promise me to accomplish this thing, / or else refuse it, you have nothing to fear," or in other words, even as Thetis begs his consent, she acknowledges her own impotence should he choose to deny it.²⁰ Thus, the apparent rescuer and defender of Zeus recognizes the superiority of his power to hers. With this in mind, it seems that Achilles' words are speaking more about Thetis' loyalty in aiding Zeus, which was, perhaps being tested,

than about the latter's inability to defend himself from the anger of the other gods.

Zeus' omnipotence is acknowledged by Achilles, a proud demi-god who is unlikely to recognize easily the superiority of any other being to himself. When he wants something, as in his prayer in Book 16 where he asks for the life and success of Patroklos, he does so in confidence, never doubting the deity's ability to grant his request.²¹ After the death of his friend, Achilles still acknowledges Zeus' pre-eminence when he swears "an oath . . . / 'No, before Zeus, who is greatest of gods and the highest'".²² Even though he has not been granted his request, Achilles is still aware that the son of Kronos is omnipotent; the fact that his request was not granted does not negate this. Later, Achilles speaks of Zeus' power to send blessings or evils into the lives of men.

There are two urns . . . on the door-sill of Zeus. They are unlike / for the gifts they bestow: an urn of evils, an urn of blessings. / If Zeus . . . mingles these and bestows them / on man, he shifts, and moves now in evil, again in good fortune. / But when Zeus bestows from the urn of sorrows, he makes a failure / of man.²³

This statement, while not necessarily accurate in its particulars, certainly serves to emphasize Achilles' belief in Zeus' power.

Humans, more than any other race in the *Iliad*, acknowledge the supremacy and omnipotence of Zeus, and call upon his assistance in their endeavors. As Telamonian Aias says during the wrestling match with Odysseus in Book 15, "All success shall be as Zeus gives it", words that demonstrate his belief in Zeus' absolute power. Agamemnon says that "Worth many / fighters is that man whom Zeus in his heart loves", words that carry a similar meaning to those of Aias.²⁴ Hektor confesses this on many occasions, telling others how the help of Zeus can overcome all obstacles.²⁵ He says "always the mind of Zeus is a stronger thing than a man's mind.

/ He terrifies even the warlike man".²⁶ These words are in Book 17, when the Greeks and Trojans are fighting over the body of Sarpedon, son of Zeus.

The theology of the *Iliad* centers around Zeus, and the ways in which his powerful will influences the actions of men. While not immediately obvious, Zeus' all-powerful nature becomes more evident from a close analysis of the text. Understanding Zeus in his omnipotence can provide a valuable insight to the work as a whole, making more intelligible the behavior and beliefs of the other gods, of men, and of Zeus himself. The ruler of Homer's universe is truly in control, though, as demonstrated many times in the work, he allows others to change the details of his plan's execution.

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References

1. *Iliad*, I. 5.
2. *Ibid.*, 526-527.
3. *Ibid.*, 27.
4. *Ibid.*, VIII. 28.
5. *Ibid.*, XIII. 7, 15-19.
6. *Ibid.*, 10-12.
7. *Ibid.*, XV. 158-167.
8. *Ibid.*, 348-349.
9. *Ibid.*, XV. 185-187.
10. *Ibid.*, XV. 212-217.
11. *Ibid.*, 153-156.
12. *Ibid.*, XIV. 158.
13. *Ibid.*, XIV. 315-328.
14. *Ibid.*, XV. 157-161, 220, 231-233.
15. *Ibid.*, XV. 104-109.
16. *Ibid.*, I. 397-400.
17. *Ibid.*, I. 397-401.
18. *Ibid.*, I. 503.
19. *Ibid.*, I. 500-512.
20. *Ibid.*, I. 514-515.
21. *Ibid.*, 241-248.
22. *Ibid.*, XXIII. 42-43.
23. *Ibid.*, XXIV. 527-532.
24. *Ibid.*, IX. 116-117.
25. *Ibid.*, XV. 490-493.
26. *Ibid.*, 176-178.