On the Necessity of Evil

By Marilyn Glaim

The ancient and classical Greeks (ca. 800–300 B.C.) had no sacred scripture. Rather, in epic poems, dramas, and philosophical treatises that encompass all Greek mythology they explored emergence of the gods and the meaning of good and evil. Most of the Greek population heard the myths from itinerant poets or experienced them in large, outdoor theaters as part of festivals that celebrated the gods and the agricultural seasons. From these stories they learned that it was unwise to challenge Fate and that worship of the gods and loyalty to family and community were necessary for survival.

In the following scene, Hesiod (ca. 700 B.C.) dramatizes one story of the emergence of Zeus as the most powerful god in the Greek pantheon:

> The boundless sea echoed terribly, earth resounded with the great roar, wide heaven trembled and groaned, and high Olympus was shaken from its base by the onslaught of the immortals; the quakes came thick and fast and, with the dread din of the endless chase and mighty weapons, reached down to gloomy Tartarus.
>
> Thus they hurled their deadly weapons against one another. The cries of both sides as they shouted reached up to starry heaven, for they came together with a great clamor. Then Zeus did not hold back his might any longer, but now immediately his heart was filled with strength and he showed clearly all his force. He came direct from heaven and Olympus hurling perpetual lightning and the bolts with flashes and thunder flew in succession from his stout hand with a dense whirling of holy flame. Earth, the giver of life, roared, everywhere aflame, and on all sides the vast woods crackled loudly with the fire.[1]

Thus, in battle that lasts ten years Zeus not only overcomes his child-eating father, Cronus, along with the other terrible Titans, he also establishes his right to reign in power and glory on Mount Olympus, from which he controls the skies. Cronus and his cohorts are chained in Tartarus, deep in the earth, where they rumble their protests in earthquakes and volcanic eruptions.

As descendants of the Judeo-Christian tradition, we find in the Zeus/Cronus story a reminder of God casting Lucifer and his unfaithful legions out of heaven, condemning them to everlasting banishment while allowing them access to the earth and its inhabitants. However, God, as absolute ruler of heaven and the universe, is infinite, all powerful, and all knowing, and therein lies one of the key differences between the Judeo-Christian God and Zeus.

Zeus is created from the earth. He is not all-powerful or all-knowing, though according to the Greeks he is immortal and more powerful than thunder and lightning. The other gods fear his power, which is greater than their own, but they use their own power both to challenge Zeus and to meddle in life on earth.

This is made especially clear in Homer's *Iliad*, in which battle outcomes are determined as much by the

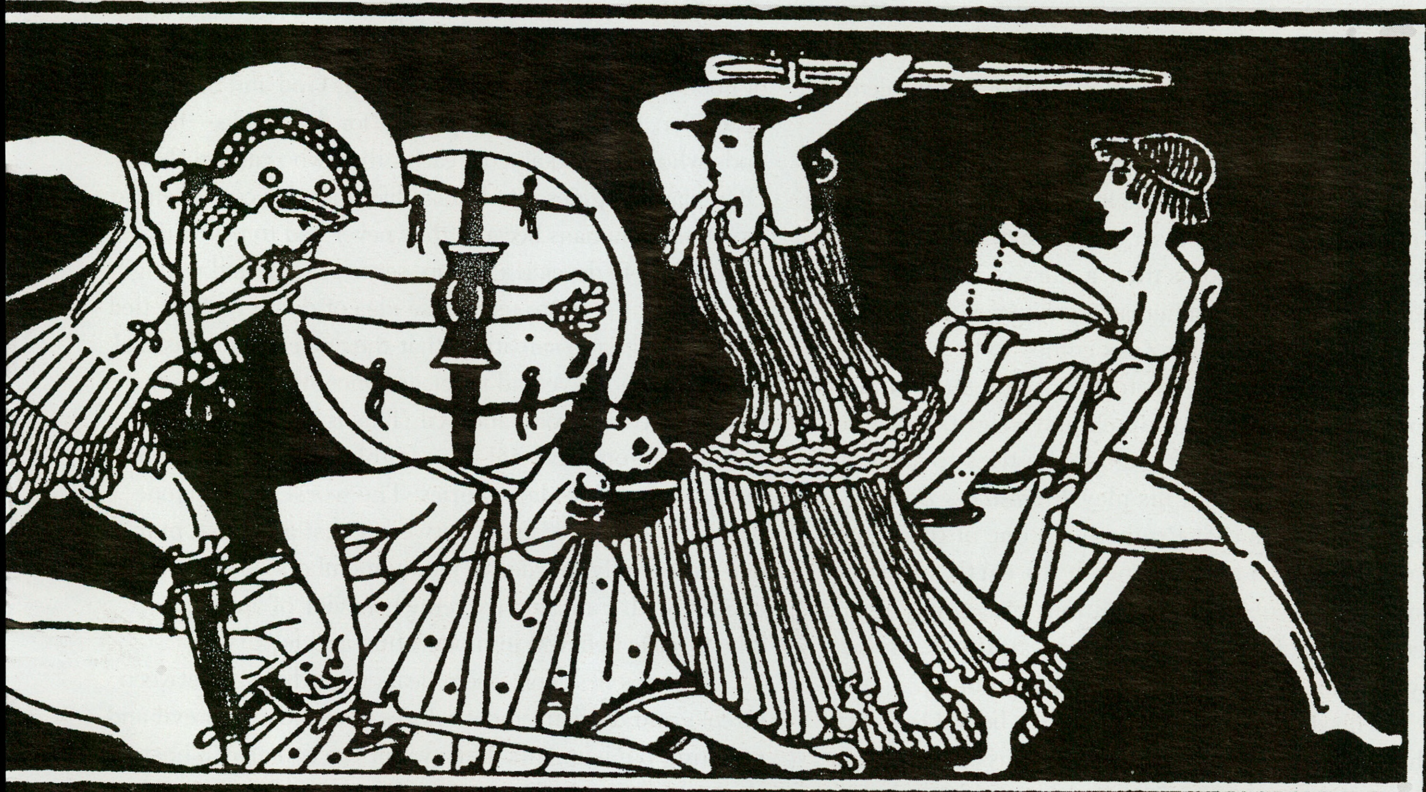
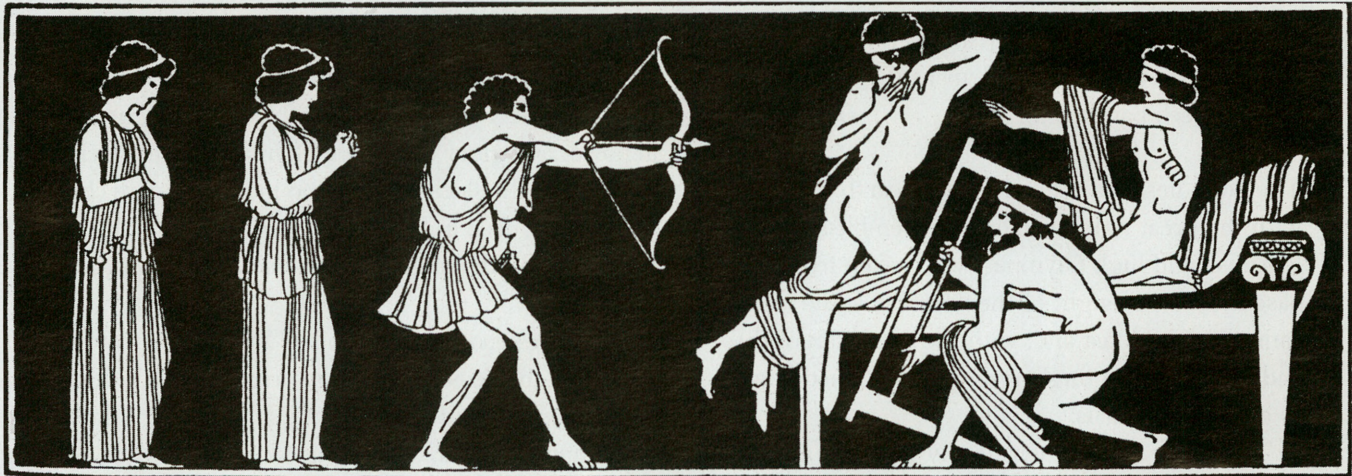


ILLUSTRATION OF THE SACK OF TROY, PAINTED ON A CUP BY BRY'GOS, THE BOOK HOUSE FOR CHILDREN, CHICAGO, 1949



ODYSSEUS SLAYS SUITORS/BOOK HOUSE FOR CHILDREN, CHICAGO, 1949

will of the gods as by the skill of the warriors themselves.[2] Zeus declares his intention to be impartial in the war against Troy. His daughter, Athena, and his wife, Hera, make no pretense of impartiality. They're mad at Troy for a perceived slight, and when it serves their purposes they cause the city's forces to lose battles.[3]

Further, we see that in spite of immortality and power to interfere in the lives of men, all gods—including Zeus—are under the rule of Fate, which is not personified as the gods are, but is widely recognized as the real force in the world. Hera at one point ridicules Zeus, reminding him that even if he wanted, he could not save any man that Fate wished to destroy.[4]

Just as Zeus is not the equivalent of the Old Testament God, neither is Cronus the moral equivalent of the Devil. Certainly, the eating of his own children in an effort to ensure his lasting power is an abominable act, but Cronus is not portrayed as the incarnation of evil, nor is he the cause of man's fall. In fact, Greek mythology contains no story of the Fall, nor is there a story of redemption. Man emerges from a subhuman state instead of falling.

Although eventually Zeus comes to be viewed as the ethical god and the protector of human community, according to the earliest Greek playwright, Aeschylus (525–426 B.C.), Zeus is the god who tries to keep man in a subhuman state. In his play *Prometheus Bound*, Aeschylus asserts that Prometheus, one of the Titans who has not been bound beneath the earth, takes pity on man in his subhuman condition, and, going against direct orders of Zeus, he gives man all it takes to be fully human: fire, knowledge, and community.[5]

For his disobedience Prometheus is bound to a rock with a wedge through his chest, and Zeus promises him that for all eternity an eagle will pick at his liver. Suffering but unrepentant, Prometheus hurls his own set of threats at Zeus, telling him that he knows a secret that will cause his downfall. The end of the story is not available to us because two plays have been lost in the trilogy of which *Prometheus Unbound* is one part. However, the fact that the third play is titled *Prometheus Unbound* suggests that differences between the god and the Titan are settled.

Prometheus remains in mythology the hero who made man human, and Zeus retains his power and glory for several more centuries of Greek thought.

As these stories reveal, Greek mythology has no moral equivalent to the Great Controversy. Rather, the controversies among gods were many and ongoing. In the Christian view, it is difficult even to talk in terms of good and evil without talking about God and Satan in opposition. How then was it possible for the Greeks—having gods who connived against each other, who carried their Olympian struggles into human life, and who could behave worse than humans because they never had to pay with their lives—to develop a mature sense of right and wrong?[6]

It might seem to us, whose idea of doing right is tied closely to sin and salvation, that the ancient and classical Greeks would have had no clear conceptions of the difference between good and evil. This is wrong. Greek notions of good and evil were highly developed and endlessly explored in their stories. The worst evils include breaking the sacred trust between guest and host, murder—especially murder of family members—refusal to comply with Fate, and extreme behavior of any kind. The Greeks believed in moderation and loyalty.

Homer's first epic poem deals with the war between Greeks and Trojans and explores many forms of evil and resulting punishments. Betrayal of the courtesy a host shows his guest begins an agonizing war that forms the basis of the *Iliad*. Thus, when Paris, son of Priam, king of

Troy, betrays the trust of his generous host, Menelaus, and seduces his wife, Helen, the Greeks go to war against Troy to bring Helen home, believing that only war can correct this evil. Ten years and thousands of lives later, Troy smolders in ruins as the wayward Helen is returned to her husband. But in the Greek ideas of good and evil, right has been restored.

The restoration of right through war is nevertheless a process that involves many evils along the way. Even before the Greeks sail off to war, King Agamemnon, brother of Menelaus and leader of all the Greek forces, finds himself and his men becalmed week after long week. While there, Agamemnon embarks on a course that leads to the murder of his child, as Euripides (480–405 B.C.) tells in his tragedy, *Iphigeneia at Aulis*.[7] Agamemnon hears that West Wind demands the sacrifice of a child—for which the Greeks were not known—his own beloved daughter, Iphigeneia. To the Greeks, this was truly horrifying. Yet Agamemnon does the deed—one made even more evil by the way he lies to his wife and tricks his daughter into coming to the place of sacrifice.

As Lance Morrow points out in his recent book *Evil: An Investigation*, "much evil arises from perceived necessity."[8] Agamemnon, in giving in to the "necessity" of sailing to war, commits an evil that will come back to destroy him in mind and body. The chorus (a group in Greek tragedies that reports community reaction) chants its lament for the crime Agamemnon has committed. "When the King accepted this necessity, he grew evil. Crosswinds darkened his mind, his will stopped at nothing. It pleased him to imagine the infatuation of his hard heart was daring and decision."[9]

Agamemnon's mind was indeed darkened. In the *Iliad*, Homer portrays him as a leader more concerned about authority than the welfare of his men. In Euripides' *Hecuba*, we see that evil choices become easy to make. Having killed his own daughter for safe passage to Troy, Agamemnon callously allows the sacrifice of one of the few remaining children of the king of Troy.[10] Aeschylus finishes the story in his trilogy of plays known as the *Oresteia*.[11] Indeed, Agamemnon does return home safely as a conquering hero and sits down to an elaborate banquet prepared by his wife, Queen Clytemnestra. But at its close he dies by her avenging hand.

With this murder, we are given another look at the Greek conception of evil. If an entire war could be fought to preserve the honor of the family and the Greeks, how could a wife escape death when she murders her husband, even if he murdered her daughter? It turns out that she cannot. Her own children, Orestes and Electra, turn against her. They believe she is not avenging a daughter's death, but only snatching the kingdom away from her husband to give it to the lover she has taken in his absence. In striking contrast to Clytemnestra is faithful Penelope, in Homer's *Odyssey*. She waits twenty years for her wandering husband to return from Troy.[12]

As the tragedy of Agamemnon's house continues, Orestes kills his mother, knowing gods punish those who murder parents. He is hounded out of town, chased by avenging Furies. Orestes is eventually forgiven as the Furies descend on him and turn themselves into forgiving Graces. Thus, the Greeks learned the subtle distinction between family murders committed for evil reasons and those committed to right the wrongs of evil parents. As these stories reveal, Greeks developed a sophisticated and elaborate conception of the hierarchy of evil. Murder is evil, but sometimes a necessity; therefore, punishment must fit the seriousness of the crime.

Gradations of evil are also explored in the most famous of all Greek stories, *Oedipus the King*, by Sophocles (495–405 B.C.).[13] Here Greeks could view the consequences of a king's refusal to submit to the fate that his son will grow up to kill him. Instead, the king arranges for the murder of his infant son, Oedipus. But in trying to arrange his own fate, the king actually ensures that Oedipus will indeed kill him. Oedipus, in turn, tries to circumvent the prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother, but accidentally commits both crimes. Even though the actions are not by his own will, Oedipus is condemned to spend the rest of his life in exile from his beloved city.

Why is the punishment so severe? Partly because of the Greek response to the evil of patricide and incest, and partly as a result of the effort to circumvent Fate. Man may not assert his will against Fate. As in the case of Orestes, Oedipus finally achieves forgiveness, even redemption. In the less well-known sequel to the story, *Oedipus at Colonus*, Oedipus is not only forgiven, he is also allowed a death attended by gods. In what appears to be an argument that too strict an application of the principle of accepting one's Fate may itself be evil, Sophocles suggests that man should not be wholly blamed for attempting to prevent himself from committing terrible crimes and should not be blamed for failure to avoid the crime. Oedipus powerfully argues his innocence:

ORESTES AND CLYTEMNESTRA/BOOK HOUSE FOR CHILDREN, CHICAGO, 1949

How can my nature be evil,
when all I did was matching others' actions?
Even had I done what I did full consciously,
even so, I would not have been evil,
But the truth is, I knew nothing
when I came where I did.[14]

In this play, written many years after *Oedipus the King* and near the end of his life, Sophocles seems ready to assert that man has a right to make some of his own choices about Fate.

Plato, one of the most famous of Greek philosophers (429–347 B.C.), begins his extensive examination of Greek ideas of evil and finds them wanting. He challenges the writing of the poets and playwrights, asserting that their ideas are not appropriate to his plans for the ideal republic, which are detailed at length in his treatise, *Plato's Republic.*[15] He sees Greek stories as too emotional, and even worse, he believes they portray the gods in a negative light.

Plato would not allow young people of his republic to read tales of death and destruction, nor would he want them to see the gods acting in conniving and spiteful ways. They must be portrayed as completely good and worthy of emulation. Plato goes so far as to say that unbelief in the gods itself is evil and should be treated as a capital crime.[16] Rather than allowing literature to explore the meaning of evil, he wishes to stamp out evil by keeping young people innocent of wrongdoing. But mere avoidance of evil is not enough. Goodness must aggressively assert itself, for the mere absence of good is indeed evil.

Plato believes that stories of murder and incest merely inflame the passions. In his republic, law will guard the morals of the young: "The force exerted by law is excellent, and one should always co-operate with it, because although 'calculation' is a noble thing, it is gentle, not violent, and its efforts need assistants, so that the gold in us may prevail over the other substances."[17]

Furthermore, the individual "must digest the truth about these forces that pull him, and act on it in his life; the state must get an account of it either from one of the gods or from the human expert ... and incorporate it in the form of a law to govern both its internal affairs and its relations with other states. A further result will be a clearer distinction between virtue and vice."[18] Whereas storytelling fails to moderate human behavior and may even incite bad thinking and bad doing, Plato believes that righteous laws will prevail.

Today we should be grateful that Plato did not succeed in stamping out the poets and playwrights, for their work provides us with our fullest understanding of Greek beliefs about evil. These beliefs, though set in the context of Fate and the gods, focus on human relationships that were meant to be respectful of the self and others. A failure of respect was a failure of goodness. Failure of goodness defined evil. Though the Greeks lacked the Judeo-Christian framework that defines good and evil as diametrically opposed forces, through their stories of gods and humans the Greeks created a society that demanded high standards of behavior.

Notes and References

1. Mark Morford and Robert J. Lenardon, *Classical Mythology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), citing Hesiod's *Theogony*, on pages 77–78.

2. Homer, *The Illiad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Viking, 1990).

3. Edith Hamilton, *Mythology: Timeless Tales of Gods and*

Heroes (New York: Mentor, 1969), 27.

4. Hera and Athena lost a beauty contest to Aphrodite when Paris, a prince of Troy, chose her as the most beautiful of the three goddesses. The beauty contest had been set up by the goddess of discord, Eris, who was angry at not being invited to the wedding of Peleus and Thetis. This contest ultimately causes the Trojan War because Aphrodite's reward to Paris is Helen, who was already married but is admired as the most beautiful woman in the world. Even though the Trojans regularly sacrificed to Athena and Hera in the hope that they would help their cause, the goddesses remain determined to see Troy and Paris destroyed. This is only one of many examples that demonstrate the Greek belief that the gods cause much human strife.

5. Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound and Other Plays*, trans. Philip Vellacott (London: Penguin, 1961).

6. Edith Hamilton writes extensively about the nature of the gods and their relationship with humans. Stories abounded of Zeus impregnating human women. Hera feared him enough not to punish him directly, but she always took out her anger on the earth-bound women. As Morford and Lenardon point out, "The gods are generally depicted as human in form and character; but although they look and act like humans, very often their appearance and their actions are to some extent idealized. Their beauty is beyond that of ordinary mortals, their passions more grand and intense, their sentiments more praiseworthy and touching; and they can embody and impose the loftiest moral values in the universe. Yet these same gods can mirror the physical and spiritual weaknesses of human counterparts: they can be lame and deformed or vain, petty, and insincere; they can steal, lie, and cheat, sometimes with a finesse that is exquisitely divine." Hamilton, *Mythology*, 128.

7. Euripides, *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, trans. W. S. Merwin and George E. Dimock, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

8. Lance Morrow, *Evil: An Investigation* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 222.

9. Cited in ibid.

10. Peter Levi, *A History of Greek Literature* (London: Viking, 1985), 216.

11. Aeschylus, *Oresteia*, trans. Christopher Collard (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

12. Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York, Viking, 1996).

13. Sophocles, *Sophocles I: Oedipus the King; Oedipus and Colonus; Antigone*, trans. David Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

14. Ibid., 270.

15. Plato, *The Republic* (London: Penguin, 1974).

16. Plato, *The Laws* (London, Penguin, 1970), 444.

17. Ibid., 74–75.

18. Ibid.

Marilyn Glaim is a professor of English at Pacific Union College.

Happenings: San Diego Adventist Forum

available on audiocassettes (usually two cassettes per session)

- ☐ Dr. Raymond Cottrell and Larry Christoffel (Feb/02)
  The "Sanctuary Doctrine" — Asset or Liability
  (This has been AAFSD's most widely distributed set of tapes ever!!)
- ☐ Robert Wonderly (Aug/03)
  Faith on Ice: a Look at the Cold, Hard Evidence
- ☐ Dr. Gary Fraser (Sep/03)
  Adventism's Gift to the World: Empirical Evidence for Better Health, Research Findings of the Most Recent Adventist Health Study
- ☐ Dr. John Cobb, Jr., Presenter; (Oct/03)
  Dr. Madelynn Haldeman, Responder
  The Biblical Perspective on Homosexuality
- ☐ Dr. Fred Hoyt (Nov/03)
  The Menace of Mesmerism in Maine: Its Impact on Two American Religions – or – Aspects of Ellen You Might Never Have Known
- ☐ Dr. Charles Teel, Jr. (Jan/04)
  Adventists Discover the World: Personal Ethics / Social Ethics?
- ☐ Drs. Jack Gent and Ben Herndon (Feb/04)
  Enigmas about Ellen: New Challenges to SDA Thinking

Mark your choices and send with check for $8.50 (US), $9.50 (foreign) per selection to:
San Diego Adventist Forum • P. O. Box 3148, La Mesa, CA 91944-3148

To be included on the newsletter announcement mailing roster without charge and/or to receive a listing of all audiocassettes available, please send a post card with your name and address to the address above or email to address below.

If you have questions or need an answer fast, contact us at:
ak-jk@cox.net or phone 619-561-2360

Metro NY Adventist Forum

Worship for the soul but also for the mind

Do you have children, relatives, or friends in the NYC area looking for a place to worship that stimulates their brains as well as their souls, in an accepting faith community rich with music and ideas, yet deeply spiritual?

Have them check out our Web site at www.mnyaforum.org or call us at (718) 885-9533, or better, send us their contact information and we will make a personal contact to invite them to worship with us, Sabbath mornings at 11:00 at

St. Mary's Episcopal Church, 521 W. 126th St., Manhattan.