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Equal to or Greater Than: A God's Position in the Cosmos

*My word, how mortals take the gods to task! All their afflictions come from us, we hear. And what of their own failings? Greed and folly double the suffering in the lot of man.*

- Zeus, *The Odyssey*

Before Christianity, much of the Western world looked to the Greek gods to find a sense of divinity in life and through that divinity, the soulful part of human existence. However, the goddesses and gods of Greek mythology differed greatly from the singularly “perfect” God who was eventually portrayed in The Book of Job. By comparison, Greek gods were imperfect, egotistical, corrupt, and even seductive at times. In Homer’s *The Odyssey*, they often provoked and tempted the main character, Odysseus, whose god-like character traits and desire for glory kept him hovering on the verge of immortality for much of this epic. While the divine in both myths remain trapped for eternity in a soulless existence, the God in Job remains threateningly *superior* to nature which contrasts the divine plurality of gods portrayed in The Odyssey whose forces are more *equal* to nature overall.

For the mortals in *The Odyssey*, to put their trust in the gods, was to put their trust in nature essentially since each god represents a natural, elemental force. In The Book of Job however, the divine is portrayed in a much different light with God ranking *even higher* than nature, epitomizing power, and perfection in comparison to the “imperfect” and powerless beings “below”. Yet, Job is one character who is unwilling to accept his imperfect, mortal state and

strives to achieve higher levels of morality in attempt to emulate his God. Though once he has achieved this level of moral perfection, he is also targeted by God who seeks to test his uncommonly high levels of devotion. The divine in Job uses ranking to assert power over Job who is eventually awarded for his submissiveness? This fortune and ascension into power is the result of Job's piety and obedience to his God which is contrary to Odysseus's power and fortune that is secured by his ability to stand up to the gods throughout his journey back to Ithaca and his noncompliance toward the divine.

Although the "almighty" Zeus, does rank higher than the other gods in *The Odyssey*, he can still be considered equal to nature because his character is representative of thunder and the surrounding skies. Because of his divine ability to "[view] the wide world" (2:155) Zeus can also "send signs" to the characters he seeks to punish and at one point "launch[es] a pair of eagles from a mountain crest" (2:156) at the "assembly" of suitors who have invaded the hall where Telémakhos and his mother stand powerless in Odysseus's absence. When they see this "death omen" they feel their "hearts flood, forboding things to come" (2:165) which foreshadows the fate of these men who continue to "consume" the "stores" they did not pay for and "turn about" the house that is not rightfully theirs (2:149). In this scene, Zeus's powers are emitted through nature's wonderous eagles who embody the soulful element that he is, otherwise, void of. Zeus possesses character traits that are unbecoming of a mortal being who would not benefit from sharing his reactive temper or ego and inspires contrasting attributes in the majority, who do not wish to resemble this god, or any others like him.

The gods portrayed in *The Odyssey* are also more likely to play devil's advocate during their interactions with the mortals who are keen to the provocation that lies within these tactics. In Book V, after Zeus has ordered Odysseus's release from the island of Kalypso at the request

of his daughter, Athena, nymph Kalypso tempts Odysseus one last time with a chance at immortality as she searches for compliments and validation in her resentful and somewhat desperate final remarks. “Can I be less desirable than she is? Less interesting? Less beautiful? Can mortals compare with goddesses in grace and form?” (5:220). Due to the insatiable vanity embedded into this final plea, Odysseus is subconsciously provoked to feel disgust for Kalypso’s conceit and like always, is calculated in his response when he replies’ “My lady goddess, here is no cause for anger. My quiet Penelope-how well I know-would seem a shade before your majesty, death and old age being unknown to you, while she must die” (5:225). In many ways Odysseus’s wife, Penelope, also hovers close to immortality because, like her husband, she is also, a skilled deceiver and even boasts about her ability to misguide the suitors when she is telling the familiar “stranger” about the weaving strategy she used to bide her time. However, there are several other instances when we see her more complimentary traits run contrary to those of the goddesses, and it is in these moments when her morality is highlighted by these differences which account for her humanity. After Penelope offers the “stranger” (Whom she knows is Odysseus) a place to sleep, she says to him “If you are willing to sit with me and comfort me, my friend, no tide of sleep would ever close my eyes. But mortals cannot go forever sleepless. This the undying gods decree for all who live and die on earth, kind furrowed earth.” (19:684). As readers, we can sense the depth of the soul connection between Odysseus and Penelope in this line, which not only helps to humanize her character but also sets her apart from the “divine” goddesses who remain trapped in both a soulless existence and time itself.

Arguably, it is the soullessness of these goddesses that deem them immortal and are meant to represent the bad influences that one may encounter during one’s lifetime and the “sinful” pleasures that may be experienced when in the presence of these domineering forces. In

*The Odyssey* the goddesses enable and even encourage Odysseus's worst habits and tend to equate signs of virtue with weakness of character. Indeed, if Odysseus had chosen to remain with either Kalypso or Circe, he would have surrendered his mortality because he would have been choosing an immoral and soulless life with a goddess over the soulful and mortal bond he has with his wife. But since Odysseus has not lost his recollection of the deeper soul connection he shares with his long-lost wife, Penelope, his longing to be back home with her in Ithaca overpowers his craving for these seductive goddesses who fawn over him in ways that will always seem foreign to him. In *The Odyssey*, main character, Odysseus, is awarded for his ability to challenge the gods and goddesses who are unsuccessful in their attempts to corrupt him. Odysseus's willpower eventually earns him his humanity when he is reunited with his family and re-immersed into his home back in Ithaca and the mortal life, he so desires.

Although Job is described as "the greatest man in the east" (1:3), it is also clear that he is positioned hierarchically "lower" than the God he both worships and "fears". However, Job's uncommonly high levels of loyalty are soon put to test by his God who, after seeking Satan's opinion, becomes doubtful of Job's honour and destroys everything he holds dear so that he may examine his reaction to this suffering. Surprisingly, when Job learns of his multiple losses, he does "not sin by charging God with wrongdoing" (1:22) and instead maintains complete loyalty to God without hesitation stating "The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away; may the name of the LORD be praised" (1:21). In this scene, Job has just learned that his ten children are dead due to a "mighty wind" that has collapsed the house in which they were in. However, unlike the Greek gods who represent the natural forces in nature, Job's God directs nature's elements which, means that this God is less likely to be held responsible for extreme weather conditions that bring grief to the worshippers below, such as in the case of Job and his suffering.

Indeed, it is not until Job's "friends" come to "sympathize with him and comfort him" (2:11) that Job begins to lament his sorrow. The first friend to speak, is Eliphaz, who provokes Job to "appeal" to God and "lay [his] cause before him" (5:8) which sparks a fire in Job, who, for the first time, directs his frustrations at God rather than himself. Job expresses an overwhelming need for privacy and speaks desperately about the watchful eyes of his God and the invasiveness of this divine trait.

What is mankind that you make so much of them, that you give them so much attention, that you examine them every morning and test them every moment? Will you never look away from me, or let me alone for an instant? If I have sinned, what have I done to you, you who see everything we do? Why have you made me your target? (Job 7:17)

These accusations are met with hostility from Bildad the Shuhite who come to their Gods defence, calling Job's words "a blustering wind" (8:2) while bringing attention to their God's "almighty" position and purpose. Yet, Job remains critical of his God's power and maintains these convictions in his rebuttal to Bildad.

He moves mountains without their knowing it and overturns them in his anger. He shakes the earth from its place and makes its pillars tremble. He speaks to the sun and it does not shine; he seals off the lights from the stars. He alone stretches out the heavens and treads on the waves of the sea. He is the maker of the Bear and Orion, the Pleiades and the constellations of the south. (Job 9:5)

From Job's perspective, God controls nature due to his "higher" positioning in the cosmos and is the "maker" of everything that exists in Job's physical world. Evidently, God's "almighty" power frustrates Job, who questions the invisibility of the divine and its omnipotent power to "see everything".

Finally, in chapter 38, an angry and condescending God astonishes Job with his presence as he is put in his place by this "LORD" who "give[s] orders to the morning" and "show[s] the dawn its place" (38:12). In this section, it becomes evident that this God is one who is not merely representative of nature, but rather, one who directs it, claiming this ownership by stating "Everything under heaven belongs to me" (41:11). In this moment, Job's skepticism of the divine is pulverized by this profound and holy experience stating "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too powerful for me to know...My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes" (42:3). In the epilogue to follow, we learn that Job is awarded for his submission to God who "restores his fortunes" and "g[ives] him twice as much as he had before" (42:10). God blesses Job, whom he now refers to as his "servant", giving him preference over his other worshippers who have not displayed equal levels of obedience.

Unlike the highly flawed gods in *The Odyssey*, the God in The Book of Job is the essence of perfection which gives this God greater power over the worshippers and "sinners" who contrast themselves to this force. And while this unequal distribution of power does seem to provoke higher levels of morality in main character, Job, he seems to be guided mostly by a sense of fear and duty for the God he feels inferior to and endlessly strives to match his God's levels of "moral perfection". In exchange for Job's compliance and vows of eternal service, God extends his life by one hundred and forty years, giving him a taste of divine immortality during

the second and more “blessed” part his life. By contrast, Odysseus desperately wants to be released from his immortality in the otherworld and the goddesses who keep him trapped in a timeless existence. Indeed, the god-like character traits and self-seeking tendencies inherited by Odysseus during his ten-year long involvement in the Trojan War begin to fade away once the gods are convinced of his willpower and ability to conquer temptation. We see mortality as a reward for insurrection in *The Odyssey* by the zealous gods who are impressed by Odysseus’s challenging temperament and skepticism towards them.

Works Cited

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