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Justice and Power in *The Oresteia* and the Bible

Both The Eumenides and the book of Job present the relationship between their respective deities and justice, exploring how divine power influences – and is influenced by – what mortals and gods think are right and wrong. The book of Job, then, is an attempt to explain how an almighty God tolerates injustice in the world, descending to respond to the righteous Job who has suffered greatly; The Eumenides plays a comparable role for the Greeks, providing a backstory for the Athenian tradition of juries with the gods themselves constructing justice by telling the story of the first such trial at the end of a long cycle of murder. The behavior of deities in the two works appears, at first, to be directly opposite: the God of the Bible takes no part in ensuring an objective justice, whereas Athena and Apollo are judge and counsel. In both, however, what underpins justice is power: in God’s dialogue with Job in the book of Job and Athena’s trial in The Eumenides, an inspection of whose vision of justice is carried out, which systems are accepted by the weaker parties, and who the burden of righteousness is put upon show that their respective constructions of justness are predicated on imagined sources of power and preexisting legitimacy, allowing for a better understanding of the moral systems that drive the tension in both works.

The book of Job presents this relationship between justice and power most directly in God’s response to the questioning of Job. Despite never directly addressing Job’s inquiry about justice and injustice in the mortal world, the omission of such an answer in favor of declarations of power reveals that God is vindicated not by human understandings of right and wrong, but rather by his own power. God’s attitude here is best revealed when he speaks of his creation of Behemoth: “Look at Behemoth, which I made just as I made you … It is the first of the great acts of God – only its Maker can approach it with the sword,” (New Revised Standard Version, Job 40.15-19). God clearly takes pride in the creation of the animal, even presenting it as a sort of trophy representative of his greatness. It is powerful beyond human means; despite this, outside of references to its overwhelming power, it’s only ever described to eat and to sleep in the verses succeeding its introduction, such as “For the mountains yield food for it where all the wild animals play,” (Job 40.20) and “Under the lotus plants it lies, in the covert of the reeds and in the marsh,” (Job, 40.21). The Behemoth itself is then God’s showpiece to Job because it exactly has the same relationship with power that God has. God takes pride in this creation precisely because it, through its strength, transcends human framings of utility and rationality, just as God’s cosmic power is a marvel beyond human systems of justice. Job’s issues with God’s unwillingness to abide by his human notion of morality are, in God’s rebuttal, swallowed entirely by the issue of God’s vast superiority.

This theme of the powerful eliding the justice systems of the weak can also be seen in Athena’s behavior concerning the Furies in The Eumenides. The extension of the analysis done in the book of Job to The Oresteia shows that this basis of power is present irregardless of the form in which justice is apparently carried out. Even though Athena created trial by jury for Orestes, a norm that supposedly decouples power from justice, the judicial system still relies on Athena’s power as a goddess. Consider that the final ruling is legitimized in two ways: firstly through an appeal to formal legitimacy and fairness in the form of trial, and secondly through the ability to physically enforce the ruling. The latter is very clearly predicated on power; after Athena makes the final ruling to let Orestes go free – an act which contradicts the Furies’ initial moral beliefs – she confronts the Furies with a threat, stating, “I have Zeus behind me. Do / we need to speak of that? I am the only god / who knows the keys to where his thunderbolts are locked,” (Aeschylus 3.826-828). Here, just as God sidesteps Job’s conception of justice in favor of his own justified by his power, Athena backs up her formulation of justice with her strength which surpasses the Furies. The first warrant for legitimacy, however, is more subtle, but reliant on Athena’s authority irregardless: the appeal to a fair trial – “This was the result / of a fair ballot which ended up even,” (Aeschylus 3.795-796) – is only possible because Athena created the exact format of the trial through her own, preexisting authority. To create the court, she declares that “I shall select judges of manslaughter, and swear / them in, establish a court into all time to come,” (Aeschylus 3.483-484). It is precisely her status as a goddess, divinely wise, that gives the form of the trial, which she herself decided arbitrarily, fairness in the end. No other party could have set up a legitimate trial because no other party has the influence of Athena. The circular nature of the argument here, where Athena appeals to a system of her own creation to legitimize her own final decision, is also indicative of the same sort of relationship to human ideas of reason and justice as well: Athena’s power elides the logical consequences and instead simply imposes, almost by fiat, her conception of justice onto the Furies and Orestes, just as God’s power elides the logical complaints of Job. In both The Eumenides and the book of Job, powerful deities are able to impose their conceptions of justice onto weaker entities.

This pressing of frameworks of justice is not only seen merely from the viewpoint of the powerful, either. The weaker beings in both works, Job and the Furies, ultimately accept the terms put forth by God and Athena, respectively, when they recognize the power that is in front of them. Look at Job first; he reacts to God’s declarations by admitting defeat in the fact of omnipotence: “I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted … Therefore I have uttered what I did not understand,” (Job 42.2-3). The crucial part is the claim that Job knows of God’s power at the start of his response. Job, as a pious believer in the Abrahamic God, has always known that God can do all things, so the point of this admission is not to state a new lesson that he has learned, but rather to convey his realization that God’s power necessarily transcends his complaints. He has accepted that God cannot, by virtue of his might, be subject to mortal value systems. In this case, once he accepts fully his submission, stating “but now my eye sees you; therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes,” (Job 42.5-6), God ameliorates Job’s old suffering by restoring his old riches and family, offering a sort of reconciliation once Job submits himself to the power that God wields. Note that this restoration means that Job himself regains power and influence, further justifying accepting the framework that God presents to him. For Job, he ultimately accepts a system of justice that is itself justified by power, leading gaining power himself, lending extra legitimacy to the accepted hierarchy.

There is a parallel to Job’s acceptance of God’s power and the Furies’ acceptance of Athena’s terms to become a positive role in Athens as well. While Job submits to God, the Furies submit to Athena, opening the ending chorale of The Oresteia with “I accept this home at Athena’s side / I shall not forget the cause / of this city,” (Aeschylus 3.916-918). The difference in power between Athena and the Furies is relatively close, but still, the power that Athena wields ultimately means the resignation of the Furies to Athena’s moral system, as they become vessels for carrying out Athen’s, and by extension, Athena’s will. The Furies too, much like Job, get a reconciliation from Athena that boost their power and stature, as afterward, Athena declares “I establish in power / these great divinities, difficult to soften,” (Aeschylus 3.928-929). This granting of status to the Furies is similar to the restoration of Job’s fortune, as in both cases the original conflict between models of justice, after the presentation of power, is resolved in favor of the side with more power, and the weaker party is compensated for their acceptance of the new moral system with new power of their own.

This reconciliation between competing visions of justice not only grants new status to the more limited faction but also imposes a burden onto the weaker party to ensure that justice is enforced in the future. This is most clearly seen in The Eumenides when Athena explicitly gives the role of a protector to the Furies: “To them is given the handling / entire of men’s lives,” (Aeschylus 3.930-931). Athena, the party with power, after overruling their desire to see Orestes punished, actually enlist the Furies as enforcers of the agreed-upon moral system. There is a very clear distinction between the Furies’ desired behavior before and after their confrontation with power as well, being transformed from destroyers – ancient goddesses willing to “let loose on the land / the vindictive poison / dripping out of [the Furies’] hearts” (Aeschylus 781-782) – to the Eumenides, or Kindly Spirits. This change is even shown physically, with the actors of the Furies replacing black robes with reddish-purple ones, a color associated with royalty and influence for the Achaeans. The clash with a greater power changes the Furies’ conception of justice and results in the end with them enforcing this new framework.

This analysis can be extended to Job as well but more subtly. Consider that the system that Job accepts in the face of God’s power is one in which he no longer expects God to follow human beliefs of right and wrong; in this sense, Job is more accepting the absence of a general justice system rather than any specific extant one. Thus, he will “repent in dust and ashes,” (Job 42.6) and resume his normal life beyond that. However, given that Job only accepts that God is above human justice, the implication is that humans are not then similarly exempt. This is made especially obvious in Job’s admission that he has “uttered what [he] did not understand, things too wonderful for [him],” (Job 42.3). This wondrous thing is God’s divine power and is the crux of why Job retracts his accusations of God not enforcing right and wrong. This cannot be applied to anyone or anything less than a divine power, and therefore humanity doesn’t get the same exemption. Then, as humanity can no longer expect God to create justice everywhere, the implication of the book of Job is then that the burden is on humanity to enforce their own justice.

There is a deep parallel between the book of Job and The Eumenides. In both, two parties with different conceptions of justice clash, after which the stronger party offers the defense of their intrinsic power, leading to the weaker party submitting to the more powerful deity, resulting finally in the lesser group enforcing justice through the framework of the greater. The continuation of analysis stemming from one text onto the other reveals that they share a deeper structure, with both posing questions and answers about the relationship between power and justice, yielding finally a justice born from power. This symmetry is critical, especially because on a more abstract meta level, both are stories about how justice interacts with religion – how theology justifies frameworks of justice in their respective societies. After all, the question of justice spans space and time, and so the same basic inquiries of why a specific method of justice exists or does not exist are answered in both Greek and Biblical work. In light of that, the correspondence is partially a natural consequence of asking the same fundamental question, with both cultures ultimately falling back on the perception of power in the gods that they respectively believe in to generate the legitimacy underpinning both the literary systems of justice and their real counterparts.

Works Cited

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