Jacob Hreshchyshyn

Dr. Meloy

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Communication Between the Divine and Mortals in *Gilgamesh* and *The Odyssey*

Throughout *Gilgamesh* and *The Odyssey*, various types of communication between mortals and the divine appear. The divinities in each of the texts frequently initiate such communications through several means. For example, the divinities utilize dreams to provide faint foreshadowing on future events. Additionally, the gods can inspire individuals to communicate prophecies, which describe a future series of events, but not an explicit depiction of how those events occur. Finally, the gods can initiate direct communication with mortals by speaking to them for brief periods of time. Each time the gods communicate with the heroes they favor in both epics, they provide information on how to accomplish a given task, but never complete the task themselves, despite their apparent power. Therefore, while the gods in *Gilgamesh* and *The Odyssey* use different means of communication with those they favor, they utilize these means to teach those they favor, thereby creating a teacher-to-student relationship between themselves and mortals.

To begin, *Gilgamesh* demonstrates that the gods use dreams to teach mortals they favor. Perhaps the section that is most heavily concentrated with dreams is the story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu travelling to the Cedar Forest to kill Humbaba, the monstrous forest guardian. Throughout the story, Gilgamesh has frightening dreams, causing Gilgamesh to ask Enkidu to interpret the dreams. While interpreting the last of Gilgamesh’s dreams, Enkidu says, “The man who pulled you up from the ground and gave you fresh water from his waterskin is Lugalbunda, your personal god. With *his* help, we will achieve a triumph greater than any man has achieved” (*Gilgamesh* 116). Enkidu interprets the previous dreams in a similar manner. Enkidu interprets each dream as “favorable” and proceeds to describe the future events depicted in the dreams. The interpretations describe not only the coming challenges, but also the certainty of claiming victory with the help of divinities. The fact that Enkidu gleans the idea of the pair receiving help from Gilgamesh’s personal god suggests that this fact was meant to be communicated by a god who favors Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Additionally, one can determine two aspects of teaching at play in these dreams. The first aspect is the apparent knowledge of what to expect before fighting Humbaba so that Gilgamesh and Enkidu may be prepared. The second aspect is the lesson the pair is meant to learn after the two receive guidance in the dreams. The conflict with Humbaba ultimately teaches Gilgamesh and Enkidu that the strength they possess stems from the bond between each of them, thereby suggesting that those who work in union with each other are nearly unstoppable when facing any obstacle. Thus, this conflict demonstrates that the previous dreams serve to allude to the practical application of the lesson the gods are teaching. In other words, the gods use dreams to introduce the lesson and enforce the lesson with experiences depicted in the dreams. Therefore, dreams in *Gilgamesh* act out of the favor of the gods to prepare mortals for coming challenges and to lead them to learn lessons forged through experience.

Similar in purpose to dreams, the gods utilize prophecies to teach mortals they favor in *The Odyssey*. Despite losing the favor of Poseidon, Odysseus is shown to be favored by the goddess Circe, who helps Odysseus in his homecoming by sending him to the prophet Tiresias in the underworld. Circe even promises fair winds towards the underworld and gives instructions on how to summon the dead (*The Odyssey* 439). While in the underworld, Tiresias, inspired by Persephone, gives an account of the trials Odysseus must face and the rewards he will receive once Odysseus overcomes the trials. While prophesying to Odysseus, Tiresias says, “You have to suffer, but you can get home, if you control your urges and your men” (*The Odyssey* 443). This passage proves to be one of the key lessons Odysseus must learn from the prophecy. Earlier in the epic, Odysseus, furious at the injustices he and his men suffered at Polyphemus’ cave, taunted Polyphemus twice, thereby nearly causing the destruction of his and his men’s homecomings. Odysseus and his men were also cursed to suffer after revealing his name to Polyphemus in his taunts. The curse served not to teach Odysseus, but served instead to punish Odysseus for the blinding of Polyphemus. However, the curse did create a need for Odysseus to learn to put aside his intense desire for preserving his honor in order to save himself and to attempt to save his men. Therefore, the fact that Odysseus is sent to the underworld to receive these instructions by Circe demonstrates that Circe is acting as a teacher. Additionally, the prophecy itself acts as a guide for Odysseus in the trials that Odysseus must experience. While the prophecy promises that Odysseus will ultimately die of “comfortable old age, your people flourishing” (*The Odyssey* 443), Odysseus still must suffer and overcome obstacles in order to reap those rewards. Through experiences outlined in the prophecy, such as his late homecoming, the destruction of the suitors, and his journey to the society that lacks knowledge of sailing (*The Odyssey* 443), Odysseus learns that labor is required in fulfilling the prophecy. Therefore, *The Odyssey* demonstrates that the gods utilize prophecies to teach those they favor using lessons told in prophecy and using experiences outlined in prophecy.

Both texts demonstrate that the gods teach those they favor using direct vocal communication. To begin, *Gilgamesh* demonstrates such a means of teaching in the story of Utnapishtim. The story describes how five gods swear to keep plans of unleashing an apocalyptic flood a secret. However, Ea, one of the gods who swore by the oath, decides to communicate this information to Utnapishtim by beginning the conversation in talking to Utnapishtim’s reed fence with the true intention of addressing Utnapishtim specifically. Ea says, “King of Shuruppak, quickly, quickly tear down your house and build a great ship, leave your possessions, save your life” (*Gilgamesh* 181). Ea proceeds to give information on how to construct the ship and that Utnapishtim must use it to house animals during the Flood. Again, two aspects of teaching are apparent in the encounter between Ea and Utnapishtim. First, as in dreams and prophecies, the encounter serves to provide information on what to expect in the future, thereby teaching Utnapishtim how to respond to the coming flood and to questions surrounding the construction of the ship. Second, the encounter helps lead Utnapishtim not only to the reward of eternal life, but also to the understanding that rewards given by the gods are only granted when someone accomplishes something truly notable. Additionally, Ea displays an apparent favoritism towards Utnapishtim when he discusses Utnapishtim’s fate with the other gods. Ea says, “It is right to punish the sinner for his sins, to punish the criminal for his crime, but be merciful, do not allow all men to die because of the sins of some” (*Gilgamesh* 190). This passage displays Ea’s motives for providing information to Utnapishtim about the Flood, including an implication that Utnapishtim has done nothing to deserve death by the Flood. Therefore, the story of Utnapishtim demonstrates that the gods can utilize direct communication with mortals to teach those they favor.

Finally, *The Odyssey* demonstrates the gods’ use of direct vocal communication to teach in the story of Odysseus’ battle with the suitors. Unlike the previous examples where the gods offered instructions to the heroes they favored, Athena, presently disguised as Mentor, simply rouses Odysseus to battle. Athena’s favoritism towards Odysseus is clearly stated in her address. Athena says, “Come now, stand by me and watch how Mentor, son of Alcimus, will treat your enemies as recompense for all your service” (*The Odyssey* 574). This address serves to encourage Odysseus and inform him that the gods are favorable towards Odysseus’ attempt to defeat the suitors and resume his position as master of the house. Homer also provides additional details on Athena’s motives. He says, “But she did not grant decisive victory; she kept on testing Odysseus’ courage, and his son’s” (*The Odyssey* 575). The two passages demonstrate that, while Athena does want Odysseus to win the fight against the suitors, Odysseus and his son, Telemachus, still must actively strive to achieve victory. This lesson mirrors the lesson given in the underworld and again serves to teach Odysseus that the will of the gods, as it relates to the affairs of mortals, must be carried out by mortals. Therefore, *The Odyssey* demonstrates how the gods can utilize direct communication with mortals they favor in order to teach those mortals.

In conclusion, while the gods use differing means of communication with mortals, they demonstrate that they use these means to teach those they favor, thereby establishing the gods as teachers and mortals as students. *Gilgamesh* prominently displays such teaching in Gilgamesh’s dreams, which depict future events that serve to teach how to address the events and to teach Gilgamesh and Enkidu the nature of their strength. *The Odyssey* relies heavily on prophecy to demonstrate how the gods teach Odysseus not to let the desire for glory prevent him from bringing about his homecoming. Both texts utilize direct vocal communication to display how the gods teach those they favor. *Gilgamesh* does so by demonstrating how Utnapishtim, through his direct communication with Ea, learns how to defend himself against the Great Flood and that the gods reward only those who perform truly notable deeds. Finally, *The Odyssey* demonstrates the gods’ use of teaching through direct vocal communication in Odysseus’ encounter with Athena, who is disguised as Mentor. Athena teaches Odysseus that, though the gods may will something with respect to the affairs of mortals, mortals themselves must act as the mechanism for carrying out the will of the gods.