

## The Severity of Tantalus's Crime in Greek Mythology

In Greek mythology, the concept of punishment plays a significant role, serving as a deterrent for those who would defy the gods. Two notable figures in Greek mythology, Tantalus and Lykaon, both received punishments for their transgressions, but the severity of their crimes and the corresponding punishments differ. While Lykaon's transformation into a wolf was temporary (Pausanias J), Tantalus's eternal torment reflects a more severe offense, whether it is hunger and thirst in Tartaros (Hyginus 82), or Mount Sipylus over his head (Antoninus Liberalis 36). This essay delves into the reasons why Tantalus's crime is generally considered more egregious than Lykaon's, examining the extent of impiety, familial bloodshed, and the attempt to transgress the boundaries of mortality and immortality.

### Impiety Towards All Gods:

The first reason for the perceived severity of Tantalus's crime is the broad nature of his impiety. In the case of Lykaon, his hubris was directed solely at Zeus. Lykaon sought to deceive and disrespect the god by planning to kill him while he slept and offering a human hostage sent by the Molossians (Ovid *Metamorphoses*). In another version, Lykaon sacrificed a human baby to the altar of Zeus (Pausanias J). Although his actions were blasphemous, they concerned only Zeus. In contrast, Tantalus's impiety extended to all the gods. According to some versions of the myth, he served his own son as a dish at a feast attended by the gods. Even Demeter, consumed by grief over the loss of her daughter Persephone, partook in this macabre banquet by eating a piece of the boy's shoulder (Buxton 89). In another variant of the story, Tantalus stole ambrosia and nectar, reserved exclusively for the gods, and shared these divine foods with mortals, transgressing the boundaries set by all the Olympian deities (Pindar lines 59-65). The fact that Tantalus's offense involved a greater number of gods undoubtedly contributes to the perception that his crime was more severe, warranting harsher punishment.

### Familial Bloodshed:

The ancient Greeks held a distinct view on murder, considering it more heinous within the family than outside of it. In the case of Lykaon, regardless of the version of the myth, he did not murder any family members. However, Tantalus's crime includes the murder of his own son, a transgression that ancient Greeks regarded as unforgivable. The belief in the sanctity of family ties is evident in succession myths, where fathers who attempted to maintain their rule by killing their own offspring, such as Uranos and Kronos, faced retribution and punishment (Hesiod lines 140-187, lines 456-508). The sole exception who escaped the succession myths was Zeus, who did not kill Athena when he perceived her as a threat to his rule but instead swallowed her mother (Apollodorus B4). The prohibition against murdering one's own children was deeply ingrained in Greek culture, and Tantalus's violation of this principle further strengthens the notion that his crime was more grievous.

### Transcending Mortality:

Another boundary that mortals were never meant to cross was the boundary between life and death. Lykaon's myth does not delve into this realm. However, Tantalus's actions ventured into this forbidden territory when he shared ambrosia and nectar with other mortals. These foods were intended exclusively for the gods and had the power to bestow immortality upon mortals. The ancient Greeks firmly believed that mortals should never aspire to become immortals, a theme evident in various stories, including the tale of Ganymedes. Even though Ganymedes remains eternally youthful, he cannot attain true immortality

as he remains unchanged in form (Homeric Hymns 5d). Tantalus's attempt to bridge the gap between mortality and immortality, compounded by the theft of divine foods, was a profound violation of the natural order. As such, his punishment is considerably more severe than Lykaon's.

In conclusion, when considering the severity of their respective crimes and the punishments they received, it becomes evident that Tantalus's transgressions were more significant and reprehensible than those of Lykaon. Tantalus's impiety extended to all the gods, he committed familial bloodshed, and he attempted to transgress the fundamental boundary between life and death. Consequently, his eternal torment in Tartarus and the burden of his actions remain as a testament to the gravity of his crime in the world of Greek mythology.

## References

- Antoninus Liberalis 36
- Apollodorus B4
- Buxton 89
- Hesiod, lines 140-187, lines 456-508
- Homeric Hymns 5d
- Hyginus 82
- Ovid Metamorphoses
- Pausanias J
- Pindar, Olympian 1, lines 1–66