

## 10. Classical Greek and Judaeo-Christian Humanism Compared in Sophocles' *Antigone* and Psalm 8: March 9-14

I will develop the theme of this essay by first citing in full a well-known choral song from Sophocles' tragic drama, *Antigone*, which many translators and commentators have given the title of "Ode to Man." I have made grateful use of Elizabeth Wyckoff's excellent clear translation in *The Complete Greek Tragedies* edited by David Grene and Richmond Lattimore, Volume II, but have not hesitated to move closer to the highly poetic Greek whenever I felt this was justified. I have placed Sophocles' "Ode to Man," first, even though Psalm 8 was probably composed earlier, perhaps much earlier than *Antigone*, which was first performed in Athens in 442 B.C., because while the chorus expresses the powerful humanistic world view which arose in classical Greek civilization, it forms a strong contrast with the thoroughly theistic humanism of Psalm 8 which also was to be a fundamental characteristic of later Christianity.

*Antigone*, lines 332-375 (in the Greek text)

*Many things strike me with awe but nothing strides more awesome than man.  
He crosses the grey sea in the winter's storm,  
making his way through the swelling waves roaring all around.  
And she, the greatest of gods, the earth  
—ageless she, and unwearied—he wears her away  
as the ploughs go up and down from year to year  
and his mules turn up the soil.*

*The flitting-minded nations of birds he snares and also  
the wild beast tribes he catches, and the salty brood of the sea  
with the twisted mesh of his nets, this clever man.  
He controls with craft the beasts of the open air,  
walkers on hills. The horse with his shaggy mane  
he holds and harnesses, yoked around the neck,  
and the strong bull of the mountain.*

*Language and thought like the wind  
and the passions that make the city  
he has taught himself, and protection from the packed ice,  
no fit home under a bright cold sky, and from the rain storm's lashing,  
ever resourceful, never without resource up against  
what will be. From death alone he cannot devise an escape,  
ways out though he has contrived from intractable illness.*

*Clever and ingenious,  
possessing skills beyond expectations one time or another  
he inches to good or ill.  
When he honours the laws of the land and the gods' sworn right*

*lofty indeed is his city; but stateless the man  
who in reckness daring dwells with baseness. Not by my hearth  
may he sit, nor share my thoughts, who does these things.*

Psalm 8 (New English Bible translation)

*O Lord our sovereign,  
how glorious is thy name in all the earth!  
Thy majesty is praised high as the heavens.  
Out of the mouths of babes, of infants at the breast,  
thou hast rebuked the mighty,  
silencing enmity and vengeance to teach thy foes a lesson.  
When look at thy heavens, the work of thy fingers,  
the moon and the stars set in their place by thee,  
what is man that thou shouldst remember him,  
mortal man that thou shouldst care for him?  
Yet thou has made him a little less than a god,  
crowning him with glory and honour.  
Thou makest him master of all thy creatures;  
thou hast put everything under his feet:  
all sheep, and oxen, all the wild beasts,  
the birds in the air and the fish in the sea,  
and all that moves along the paths of ocean.  
O Lord our sovereign,  
how glorious is thy name in all the earth!*

Anyone familiar with the history and culture of ancient Greece who reads the so-called "Ode to Man" is bound to regard it as one of the supreme expressions, in sublime poetry, of what is often called the Greek Enlightenment, that period in the history of Greek civilization during most of the fifth century B.C., from the decisive victory over the Persians in the naval battle of Salamis in 481 B.C. to the final decade of the great Athenian-Spartan War (431- 404 B.C.). This great era was centred above all in the city-state of Athens, for it was Athens which during this period enjoyed not only political and military supremacy in the Greek world but also pre-eminence in culture. A powerful collective sense of pride and confidence in its wide-ranging achievements held sway in Athens; as the great Athenian statesman Pericles, as quoted by Thucydides, put it in 431 B.C., Athens had become an "education" for all Greece. In art (above all in sculpture and vase painting), architecture, drama (both tragedy and comedy), historiography, mastery of rhetoric, the beginnings of science and philosophy, political democracy, in all of these Athens towered over the rest of the Greek world.

This confidence led some avant-garde Athenian thinkers such as Protagoras and other Sophists (as they were called) to push traditional religion and piety to the background: indeed, according to Protagoras, "man is measure of things," not the gods and their will. This creed the Sophists applied above all to ethics and morality, which they relativized to serve purely human ends and might very well issue in a position of

“might is right.” Thus indeed argues Callicles, who, together with Socrates, is the central speaker in Plato's dialogue, *Gorgias*. The same argument could also be used at the collective level: thus Thucydides records the Athenian delegates to the island city state of Melos in 416 B.C—in order to persuade its citizens to drop their neutrality and to join Athens in the war against Sparta—as making the same assertion: the weaker must submit to the stronger; this is the iron law which holds for all reality, the human world as well as that of the gods. As recollected in Plato's early dialogues, this view was sharply countered by Socrates and later by Plato himself in his mature philosophy.

Fittingly, the “Ode to Man” is not a eulogy of Athens, for the action of *Antigone* is laid in Thebes and Athens is not even tangential to the story. Its vision is much broader, for in the rich poetic language characteristic of choral song in Greek tragedy the chorus gives voice to its amazement over the various ways by which over the ages humanity has made progress in mastering, or at least protecting itself from, nature —the sea, the land, the animal world, the elements of weather— and thus making a better life for itself. It is thanks to its unique endowment of intelligence that humankind has been able to achieve this, even contriving “ways out” from “intractable illness.” However, all his cleverness and resourcefulness fails man over against the inevitable end, death; this stark awareness clouds the vision of progress. This is the traditional Greek way—already powerfully expressed in Homer's *Iliad*—of facing up to reality; indeed, the sentiment is universal in all cultures, ancient and modern. The traditional Greek view of man's constraints and limitations finds even fuller expression in the final stanza: man is good only if he “honours the laws of the land and the gods' sworn right.” If he fails to do so, he must be considered “stateless” (*apolis*) and the chorus will not have anything to do with such an outcast..

Psalm 8 is all the way a song of praise of God the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, but as such it is also a powerful affirmation of the supreme worth and dignity of God's unique creature, namely humanity, which God has entrusted with stewardship over God's creation. “Yet thou hast made him a little less than a god.” This is indeed startling: God has endowed man with an almost godlike status. The King James translators of more than 400 years ago could not bring themselves thus to translate the Hebrew *Elohim*, so they translated it as “angels.” But *Elohim*, along with *Yahweh* and *Adonai*, are recurring words for God in the Hebrew scriptures. It was originally a plural form, “gods,” but in the Jewish scriptures it denotes the one true God of Israel and of all creation, so that it is in fact perfectly acceptable to translate it here as “God” rather than the indefinite “a god,” which is somewhat reminiscent of a polytheistic world view. Two contemporary translations which subscribe to a very rigorous understanding of the divine inspiration of the Bible, the New American Standard Bible and the Holman Christian Standard Bible, indeed use this translation.

As we can clearly see in the Homeric epics and, centuries later, in the victory odes of Pindar, in the classical Greek world view, where a firm belief in God's creation of humankind, male and female alike, after God's own image was not present, godlike or near-godlike status was ascribed only to very exceptional human beings such as great warriors and athletes who are frequently blessed with an at least partially divine

parentage or ancestry. Here we cannot speak of a truly theistic humanism which, by contrast, is so characteristic of the fully developed Jewish world view and which Christianity, of course, inherited.

Finally, I am very much struck by the lines, “Out of the mouths of babes, of infants at the breast, / thou has rebuked the mighty, / silencing enmity and vengeance to teach thy foes a lesson.” That God would speak through infants to work God's will of rebuking and silencing the mighty—the rich and the powerful, we might say, perhaps those who oppress the poor, and therefore must face God's judgment, a recurring vigorously stated theme in the Hebrew prophets—this is completely foreign to the classical Greek view of how things work. The gods of the Greeks work do not work their will through little children, or at least not until adults have had their say. Again, in Psalm 8 we encounter a conviction that also lies at the heart of the Christian gospel.