Variations on a theological view of Zeus as god of the sky

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Classical Inquiries

Editors: Angelia Hanhardt and Keith Stone
Consultant for Images: Jill Curry Robbins
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For example:
Variations on a theological view of Zeus as god of the sky

May 12, 2016  By Gregory Nagy  listed under By Gregory Nagy

The theological view of Zeus as simply the god of the bright sky, which is when the weather is ‘good’, gets more complicated when the weather turns ‘bad’, that is, when this god gathers clouds to make rain either with or without thunder and lightning. At such moments, Zeus is the nephelēgētera or ‘cloud-gatherer’ (Iliad 1.511, etc.). When the weather turns ‘bad’, is it necessarily ‘bad’ for humans? In the theology of Greek mythmaking, as I will argue by way of markedness theory, the ‘badness’ of Zeus is bad only for those humans who are unrighteous and are therefore struck down by the personalized god of the rainstorm; for the righteous, on the other hand, such personalized divine action is good, since the god is striking down hostile forces who are supposedly the unrighteous. And this divine action is good also in a less personalized way, since the rain that Zeus makes will sustain the livelihood of mortals by giving them water, as we will see when we consider a localized myth about Zeus as worshipped in the Greek island-state of Aegina.

[Essay continues here...]

§0. In the posting for 2016.05.05, I concentrated on a basic theological view of Zeus as god of the sky. We saw that the Greek form Zeus is derived from an Indo-European noun that linguists reconstruct as *dyeu-, which meant ‘sky’ in general and ‘bright sky’ in particular. This meaning, as I argued, indicates that the brightness of the daytime sky is being foregrounded while the darkness of night is kept in the background. By way of wishful thinking, the unmarked or ‘default’ meaning of the root *dyeu– refers only to the bright sky in the light of day, not to the dark sky in the dead of night. By way of further wishful thinking, as I also argued, the unmarked meaning of the Indo-European noun *dyeu– refers to good weather as signaled by bright skies, while the marked meaning refers to bad weather as signaled by rain either with or without thunder and lightning. That is why, as I noted in the posting for 2016.05.05, the Russian word for ‘rain’, dozd’, derives from *dus-dyu-, which means basically ‘bad sky’. Although good things can be expected to happen when Zeus shines as a personified god, there can be bad things happening when the same personified god decides to darken the skies, gathering his clouds to make rain either with or without thunder and lightning. At such moments, Zeus is the nephelēgētera or ‘cloud-gatherer’ (Iliad 1.511, etc.). But here is where things get more complicated. In the theology of Greek mythmaking, as I will argue by way of markedness theory, the ‘badness’ of Zeus is bad only for those who are unrighteous and are therefore struck down by the personalized god of rainstorms—while the same personalized divine action is good for the righteous, since the god is striking down only those who are supposedly unrighteous. And this
divine action of Zeus is good also in a less personalized and more naturalistic way, since the rain that the god makes will sustain the livelihood of mortals by giving them water, as we will see when we consider a localized myth about Zeus as worshipped in the Greek island-state of Aegina.

§1. My argumentation, as I just indicated, will be based on markedness theory, stemming from the so-called “Prague School” of linguistics. In terms of such a theory, the idea of ‘bad sky’ is the marked member of an opposition, whereas ‘sky’ is the unmarked member. While the idea of ‘bad sky’ is in some ways negative—as when it harms the unrighteous—and in other ways positive—as when it helps the righteous—the idea of ‘sky’ as expressed by *Δυνα— is in and of itself neither negative nor positive but simply neutral. As the unmarked member of an opposition, ‘sky’ can be a bright sky when its opposite is ‘bad sky’, but it can be either a bright sky or a dark sky if there is no opposition. To say it another way, the unmarked meaning can include the marked meaning if there is no opposition. To make clear what I mean, I turn to an easier example. Let us take the opposition of unmarked ‘day’ and marked ‘night’. When this opposition is absent, the idea of ‘day’ can include the idea of ‘night’, as when I say ‘I worked on this problem for seven days and seven nights. But when I say ‘I worked on this problem for seven nights’, then I am excluding the days from the week and including only the nights. As we see here most clearly, the idea of ‘day’ as the unmarked member of the opposition can include the idea of ‘night’ when there is no opposition, whereas the idea of ‘night’ as the marked member of the opposition excludes the idea of ‘day’ when the opposition is in effect. Similarly in the case of the opposition between unmarked ‘sky’ and marked ‘bad sky’: the idea of ‘sky’ as the unmarked member of the opposition can include the idea of ‘bad sky’ when there is no opposition, whereas the idea of ‘bad sky’ as the marked member of the opposition excludes the idea of ‘bright sky’ when the opposition is in effect.

§2. With such an understanding of markedness theory, I now proceed to apply this theory to a theological situation where the ‘badness’ of Zeus as god of the sky is bad only for those who are unrighteous and are therefore struck down by this personalized god of rainstorms—while the same personalized divine action is good for the righteous, since the god is striking down only those who are supposedly unrighteous. For an example, I focus on two interconnected similes in the Homeric Iliad, both referring to a moment in a chariot-battle between the Achaeans led by Patroklos and the Trojans led by Hector. At this moment, the Achaeans chariot-fighters are starting to win the battle, routing their enemies, and this impending rout of the Trojan chariot-fighters is being compared to a violent rainstorm sent by Zeus from his abode high above on Mount Olympus:

As the Trojan chariot-fighters is being compared to a violent rainstorm sent by Zeus from his abode high above on Mount Olympus:

§3. As the Trojans flee in disarray, an aella ‘violent wind’ (line 374) is blowing from the nepheia ‘clouds’ above (line 375), and now the groaning of the horses drawing the Trojan war-chariots is compared to the roar of the violent rainstorm sent by Zeus:

§4. In this situation, it is the Trojans who suffer the negative effects of a violent rainstorm sent by Zeus, since they are losing a battle here just as the unrighteous are losing the lands that they had farmed when Zeus sends his violent rainstorm. What the simile is saying, then, is that the Trojans are the unrighteous who are harmed by the bad sky, as it were, of Zeus, while the Achaeans as led by Patroklos are the righteous.

§5. In my book Greek Mythology and Poetics (1990), I have surveyed other such situations, especially in Hesiodic poetry, where an angry Zeus strikes down the unrighteous by way of his violent storms. The anger of the gods in general and of Zeus in particular is manifest especially in the fire and wind of thunderstorms inflicted by Zeus, as we can see for example in Hesiod Theogony 687–712. Similarly, the
slaughter of the Trojans by an angry Achilles in Iliad 21.520–525 is directly compared in that passage to the burning of a city, where the fire is caused by the mēnis ‘anger’ of the gods, as we read at line 523.[2]

On the other hand, as we have just seen in the passage I quoted a minute ago, in Iliad 16.384–393, water instead of fire can likewise become the predominant manifestation of a thunderstorm inflicted by an angry Zeus on the unrighteous.

§6. In terms of the overall myth about the Trojan War, it is of course the Achaeans who were supposedly righteous and the Trojans who were unrighteous—all because of the taking of Helen by Paris/Alexander. It is because of this unrighteous act that Zeus is justified in feeling angry at the Trojans, as we read in an extended passage at Iliad 13.620–639, where Menelaos is boasting of his killing of a Trojan warrior. At lines 625–627 of this passage, the words of Menelaos refer to the taking of Helen by the Trojans, and, in this context, he says that their biggest mistake in doing so was their failure to fear the anger that Zeus would feel concerning this act of unrighteousness:

|623 ... οὐδὲ τὴν μηνὶ 624 Ζηνὸς ἐρυθρεμέτευχο χαλεπὴν ἐξείσει μὴν ἔντεινεν ὃς τέ ποτ’ ὑμι 625 διαφθέρεσθαι πόλιν ἀθλή. |

§7. The words of Menelaos here reveal that he is not really all that confident that the mēnis ‘anger’ of Zeus as invoked at line 624 of Iliad 13 will lead any time soon to the destruction of Troy. After his remark about the anger of Zeus, Menelaos starts praying to the god directly at lines 631–635 and, in the same breath, he speaks words of complaint at lines 633–634, telling Zeus that the god seems to be showing his favoritism (χαρίζεαι 633) to the Trojans instead of the Achaeans.

§8. But there is a better reason for the reluctance of Zeus at this point in the Homeric Iliad to show his anger at the Trojans for their unrighteousness in taking Helen away from Menelaos. In terms of the overall plot in this epic, the Achaeans have themselves become unrighteous. And this unrighteousness is evident already at the start of the Iliad, where the Achaeans allow their leader Agamemnon to insult Achilles by taking Briseis away from him, and so they suffer the consequences of this insult when the main hero of the Iliad now decides to withdraw from the war. Once Achilles withdraws, the Achaeans start losing while the Trojans as led by Hector start winning. And, as I argued in Chapter 20 of my book Best of the Achaeans (1979/1999), the reversals suffered by the Achaeans at the hands of Hector in the Iliad are consistently compared to the affictions caused by violent rainstorms sent by Zeus.[5] More specifically, the fire of Hector, which threatens to burn down the beached ships of the Achaeans, is consistently compared to the thunder and lightning manifested by Zeus in the midst of a violent rainstorm: by implication, Zeus himself exercises his anger by punishing the Achaeans for their unrighteousness in failing to honor the Best of the Achaeans.[6]

§9. In the Iliadic similes, Zeus exercises his anger actively by way of comparisons involving his violent storms; in the Iliadic narrative, by contrast, Achilles exercises his own mēnis ‘anger’ passively by way of waiting out the visible disaster suffered by the Achaeans.[7] It is only after Patroklos is killed and Achilles in his grief decides to rejoin his comrades that the fortunes of war can shift away from the Trojans and back to the Achaeans. And now the comparisons too can once again switch sides, as it were. We see it in Iliad 21.520–525, where Achilles, now rejoicing his comrades, is seen in the act of slaying multitudes of Trojans and, at this moment, at line 523, his actions are compared to the burning of a city that has incurred the mēnis ‘anger’ of the gods. What we saw earlier, when Patroklos afflicts the Trojans with reversals compared to a violent rainstorm of Zeus, is a preview, as it were, of the shift that will happen when Achilles begins to afflict the Trojans on his own.
§10. As I approach the ending of this essay, I come back to a point I made at the beginning. The divine action of Zeus as the maker of rain is good not only in a personalized way, as when he harms the unrighteous and thus helps the righteous. The rain made by Zeus can be good also in a less personalized and more naturalistic way, since the rain that Zeus makes will sustain the livelihood of mortals by giving them water, as we will now see most clearly by considering a localized myth about Zeus as worshipped in the Greek island-state of Aegina. According to Aeginetan mythology, there was once a massive drought that brought to a stop all plantlife in the known Greek-speaking world. Relief from the drought was made possible by the hero Aiakos, native son of the island of Aegina. The parents of Aiakos were Zeus himself and a nymph named Aegina (Ἀιγινα), who was the very embodiment of the island. Aiakos prayed to his divine father, whose abode was situated on the highest mountain of the island, named after Zeus Panhelle̱nios, to make rain again for humanity. Zeus then made rain, and Aiakos commemorated the success of his prayer by setting up a sacred space on top of this mountain where Zeus had his abode. The most revealing sources of the myth can be found in Pausanias 2.30.4 in the context of 2.29.6–8; another source is Isocrates 9.14–15.

§11. As Theophrastus says (F 6.24), if you see a nephelē ‘cloud’ hanging over the mountain of Zeus Panhelle̱nios on the island of Aegina, it is a sure sign of rain. If you visit Aegina today, you will see this most prominent mountain looming in the center of the southern part of the island, and the local population has given it a commandingly generic name: it is simply tò Oros, ‘the Mountain’. This generic mountain, a local variation on the theme of Panhellenic Olympus, will be the subject of further studies I am planning on Zeus as sky god. For now, however, I concentrate simply on the image of a cloud that is gathering above Mount Oros in Aegina, signaling rain.

Appendix

In ancient Greek, there are two most relevant words that fit the image of Zeus in the act of gathering clouds for making a rainstorm: nephos and nephelē, both meaning ‘cloud’. In §11, we have just seen the word nephelē used in such a context. As for nephos, I have this to say in another project, comparing the ambivalence of the name Zeus with reference to good or bad weather (Nagy 2003:57–58):

There is a similar cledonomantic ambivalence in the meaning of the Indo-European form *nebhos, which becomes Greek nephos (νεφως) ‘cloud’: it means basically ‘cloud’ in ambivalently good or bad weather. This ambivalence explains the fact that in some Indo-European languages the derivative of *nebhos means primarily ‘sky’, by way of metonymy. Such is the case with Russian nebo ‘sky’. Thus in Russian idiom, na nebe ni oblaka means ‘there’s not a cloud [oblaka] in the sky [nebo]’. From the standpoint of Indo-European linguistics, we see here a new word for ‘cloud’, oblako, while the old word
for 'cloud' has become, metonymically, the new word for 'sky'. This new word can even stand for a cloudless sky, as in the idiom we have just seen: na nebe ni oblaka means 'there's not a cloud [oblaka] in the sky [nebo]. Such a metonymic sense of Indo-European *nebhos as 'sky' is visible also in some Homeric usages of the noun nephos / nephea 'cloud' / 'clouds', which is potentially ambivalent in its own right concerning questions of good or bad weather. When Zeus thunders ὑψόθεν ἐκ νεφέων 'from on high, from out of the clouds' in Odyssey 20.105, he is thundering from the sky, through the metonymy of the clouds. In this case, the ambivalence of clouds or sky is canceled only by the explicit statement, in the words of the singing woman at 20.114, that there is no nephos 'cloud' in the sky. In all other Homeric attestations, the potential metonymic sense of nephos / nephea as 'sky' can remain in force. A particularly striking example of this metonymic sense of 'sky' is evident at Iliad 13.523–524, where Zeus is pictured as sitting in grand isolation on the summit of Olympus, under a shining canopy of 'golden nephsea' (ἀλλὰ ὁ γὰρ Ὀλύμπῳ ὑπὸ χρυσέα νέφεσσιν ἤστο). At that moment in the narrative, the god is described as 'wrapped up' in his own thoughts, which are conventionally called the Will of Zeus (Διὸς βουλῇσιν ἔκλεμένος, 13.524).

Bibliography


Notes

[1] For a detailed theoretical analysis of the "Prague School" terms marked and unmarked, I refer again, as before in the posting for 2016.05.05, to Nagy 1990a:5–8 = 0§§12–16.


[4] For more on this passage, I refer to the incisive remarks of Mullner 1996:37, 47.


[8] See also Fearn 2007:100–105


Tags: Aegina, dikē, mēnis, Zeus

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