Longinus and a theological view of Zeus as god of the sky

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For example:

A theological view of Zeus as god of the sky is evident from the Indo-European etymology of his divine name. The Greek form Zeús is derived from an Indo-European noun that linguists reconstruct as *dyeu-, which meant 'sky' in general and 'bright sky' in particular. As I will argue in this essay, such a theological view of Zeus is recognized and understood by Longinus in his essay On the Sublime.

§0. A theological view of Zeus as god of the sky is evident from the Indo-European etymology of his divine name. The Greek form Zeús is derived from an Indo-European noun that linguists reconstruct as *dyeu-, which meant 'sky' in general and 'bright sky' in particular. As I will argue in this essay, such a theological view of Zeus is recognized and understood by Longinus in his essay On the Sublime.

§1. The idea of brightness that is built into the name Zeús, as derived from the Indo-European noun *dyeu- meaning 'bright sky', 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 a dark sky in the dead of night.[1] This idea of 'bright sky' can be seen clearly in a Latin derivative of the Indo-European form *dyeu-, which is the noun diēs, meaning 'day'.

§2. This idea of brightness as featured in the name of Zeús explains why the Dioskouroi or 'sons of Zeus' in Greek myth are imagined to be taking turns when they light up in the alternating forms of Morning Star and Evening Star, as I argued in my Classical Inquiries posting for 2016.05.02.

§3. By way of further wishful thinking, the unmarked or "default" 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. That is why, for example, the Russian word for 'rain', dožd', derives from *dus-dyu-, which means basically 'bad sky'.[2] But there is more to it. In the logic of myth, bad skies can
of course bring not only rain but also thunder and lightning. And that is why, 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.[3]

§4. Longinus understood this. When I say “Longinus” here, I mean the author of the essay On the Sublime, which Donald Russell and Doreen Innes have convincingly dated to the first century CE—regardless of ongoing controversies about identifying the author’s actual name.[4] In this essay, Longinus quotes, as it were, words spoken by the hero Ajax in the Homeric Iliad concerning the power of the god Zeus to create the brightness of day. And these heroic words, as we will now see, link the brightness of day with the good things that the god can do for humankind, while the same words link the dark absence of this brightness with the bad things that happen when Zeus decides to take away the good things of life. Here is the context of the words spoken by Ajax as quoted by the author of On the Sublime:

Longinus On the Sublime 9.10–11 quoting from Iliad 17.645–647

§5. In this Iliadic passage quoted by Longinus, Homer is pictured as a master narrator who is so drawn into the sublimity of his narrative that the sudden onset of a mystical darkness in the daytime envelops not only the warriors who suddenly cannot see anything. The sense of darkness envelops here even the Poet himself. To repeat the formulation of Longinus, “All of a sudden, there is darkness and night for him [= the Poet], a night with no way out, shutting down the ability of the Greeks to make war. At this point Ajax, feeling helpless, says: ‘Father Zeus, I ask you to save the sons of the Achaeans from the mist. [646] Make a bright sky [aithrā]. Grant the power to see with the eyes. [647] And destroy [if destroy you will, by destroying] in the light [of day].’” There is emotion here, and it truly fits Ajax. You see, he is not praying to stay alive—such a request would be beneath the sublimity of the hero—but rather, given that he could not, in the midst of the incapacitating darkness, deploy his courage for any noble purpose and thus felt frustrated because he was unable to make war, he asks for light to happen immediately so that he may find at any cost a mark of death that is worthy of his courage—even if Zeus has turned against him.

Longinus On the Sublime 9.10–11

§7. I find it remarkable that Longinus ‘inserts’, as he describes what he is doing, this example of sublimity in a context where his essay has just finished quoting what seems to me to directly relevant passage from the Greek Septuagint version of the Hebrew Bible. This passage corresponds to what we find in Genesis 1.3–9, and here is how Longinus quotes it:

ταύτη καὶ ὁ τῶν λουδαίων δεσμοβάτης, οὐχ ο τυχὼν ἄνθρωπον ἐφείδῃ τὴν τοῦ θείου δύναμιν κατὰ τὴν ἀξίων ἐκφώνηται καλὸν ἔργῳ, εἰς ὑπὸ τὴν ἀτσαλάγη ἱδρύμας τῶν νόμων "εἶπεν ὁ Θεός," φησί,—τι "γένεσθαι φῶς καὶ ἐγένετο γῆ καὶ ἐγένετο."

So also the Lawgiver of the Jews, no ordinary man [= Moses], having made room for a worthy conception of divine power and having revealed it, wrote at the beginning of his Laws: ‘And God said,” he says—and what did he say?—“Let there be Light,” and there was light. And ‘let there be Earth,’ and there was earth.”

Longinus On the Sublime 9.10
§8. In quoting from the Septuagint, Longinus here is evidently following the example of a near-contemporary rival essayist on the subject of the sublime, a Hellenized Jew named Caecilius.[5] In the theology of this quotation, as understood by Longinus, the God of the Jews is the creator of the brightness of day by way of simply uttering the speech-act "let there be Light." Similarly, Zeus can make the light of day happen by way of simply willing it, and that is what Ajax is praying will happen in the passage that Longinus is quoting from the Iliad. The hero is praying for the theological essence of Zeus as god of the sky to shine through.

Bibliography


Notes

[1] For a detailed theoretical analysis of these "Prague School" terms marked and unmarked, I refer to Nagy 1990:5–8 = §§12–16.


[3] For a survey of sky-gods whose names derive from the noun *dyeu– in Indo-European languages, including Indic Dyaus and Latin Iuppiter, I cite the conscientious review by West 2007:166–171. I disagree, however, with West's argument that sky-gods who are named by way of derivatives from this noun *dyeu– need to have been originally distinct from various kinds of specialized storm-gods like Indra and Thor in Indic and Germanic myths respectively.

[4] The bibliography on the authorship and the dating of On the sublime is daunting, and I find it salutary to concentrate on the findings of two experts whose argumentation I trust the most. For convenient summaries of these findings, I cite Russell 1995:145–148 and Innes 2002:259–260.


Tags: Ajax, etymology, Hebrew Bible, Longinus, Septuagint, sky, Zeus

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