# Is the fall of Troy divine punishment?

## — Homer's testimony —

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Why did Troy fall? Some readers of Homer may answer, 'Because of divine anger,' and for a good reason. In the *Iliad*, Menelaus appeals to Zeus *Xeinios*, Zeus as the god of hospitality, for the punishment of Paris who betrayed Menelaus' hospitality by abducting Helen (3. 351-4) and rebukes the Trojans for not having feared the wrath of Zeus *Xeinios* (13. 624-5). This is the ultimate justification for the expedition of the Achaeans against Troy and for which Diomedes can confidently declare that they have come to Troy with a god (9. 49). They have also been given a good omen at Aulis for the outcome of the war (2. 324-9).

Moreover, the Trojans have offended against Zeus as *Horkios*, the god of oaths, too, by breaking the oaths to seal the truce between them and the Achaeans. When Menelaus is shot by Pandarus and the truce is thereby broken, Agamemnon declares that the victory of the Achaeans is now certain (4. 234-9):[1)]

> Argives, do not let go now of this furious valour.
> Zeus the father shall not be one to give aid to liars,
> but these, who were the first to do violence over the oaths sworn,
> vultures shall feed upon the delicate skin of their bodies,
> while we lead away their beloved wives and innocent
> children, in our ships, after we have stormed their citadel.

The Trojans have doubly offended against Zeus and therefore they are punished — this seems to be the story as far as the Achaeans are con-

cerned. But is this the whole story? The purpose of this paper is to examine in more detail what really is presented as the cause of the fall of Troy in Homer.

There is no question about the direct cause of the Trojan war. The abduction of Helen by Paris is repeatedly alluded to as the cause by a number of characters (*Il.* 2. 161-2, 356, 3. 99, 126-8, 156-7, 351-2, 6. 355-6, 19. 324-5, 22. 114-6, 24. 763-4, *Od.* 4. 145-6, 11. 438, 17. 118-9, 22. 227-9) and once by the poet (*Il.* 24. 28).

Naturally, the pair is much resented by both the Achaeans and the Trojans, especially by the latter whose city threatens to be destroyed by the war. The hatred of both parties is expressed most strongly when Paris has disappeared in the middle of the combat with Menelaus and nobody can find him (*Il.* 3. 453-4):

> These would not have hidden him for love, if any had seen him,
> since he was hated among them all as dark death is hated.

Even his brother Hector wishes that Paris had never been born (*Il.* 3. 40) or that he dies immediately (*Il.* 6. 281-2). Although we know that his brotherly love would not let him hate Paris completely, these wishes do contain some profound bitterness. Unlike Hector, whose strong sense of responsibility for the Trojans will lead him to his almost suicidal encounter with Achilles, Paris does not take his responsibility seriously (cf. *Il.* 6. 523-5). He tries to hide away from Menelaus (*Il.* 3. 30-32) and just after having escaped from the single combat with Menelaus by a divine hand, he fancies nothing but making love with Helen (*Il.* 3. 441-6). He stubbornly refuses to return Helen when there still seems to be some hope to save Troy by doing so (*Il.* 7. 362). Helen knows his character well by now and complains about it bitterly (*Il.* 6. 350-1):

> I wish I had been the wife of a better man than this is,

one who knew modesty and all things of shame that men say.

Paris does not seem to have any sense of guilt at all about the disaster he has brought into his city and, although the audience knows his end, there is no prospect or recollection of divine punishment of Paris in his own person in the epics of Homer.[2)]

Helen herself is far more regretful than Paris about the consequences of their marriage. By the time in which the *Iliad* is set, i. e. the last year of the war, she has started longing to go back to Sparta (*Il.* 3. 139-40, *Od.* 4. 259-261). She is fully aware of her responsibility for the catastrophic war and the thought, as well as the hostility of the Trojans (*Il.* 24. 768-775), seems to torment her (*Il.* 3. 176 *τὸ καὶ κλαίουσα τέτηκα*). Whenever she talks about the war, the epithet she gives herself is the 'bitch' (*Il.* 6. 344, 356, *Od.* 4. 145) and, unlike Paris, it is she herself who often wishes she had died before all this happened (*Il.* 3. 173-4, 6. 345-8, 24. 764). Even the web she is weaving depicts the battle between the Achaeans and the Trojans (*Il.* 3. 125-8). No doubt she cannot get it out of her head at any time.

It may be because of her deep repentance that she gets more sympathetic treatment than Paris at least from Priam (*Il.* 3. 164-5) and Hector (*Il.* 24. 767-772). And later, after all, she will be welcomed in Menelaus' house again as a happy wife. She is not punished in any obvious way, but suffers only from her own regret.

It is, however, not only this 'naughty pair' who are blamed for causing the war. The gods' hands are lurking behind the scene already when a carpenter builds ships for Paris to visit Sparta (*Il.* 5. 62-4):

> He it was who had built for Alexandros the balanced ships,
> the beginning of the evil, fatal to the other Trojans,
> and to him, since he knew nothing of the gods' plans (*θέσφατα*).

The gods' ultimate responsibility for causing the war is felt by both

parties involved and others alike. It is stated by Priam (*Il.* 3. 164-5), Helen (*Il.* 6. 349), Achilles (*Il.* 24. 547-8), Telemachus (*Od.* 1. 348 *Ζεὺς ἄιτιος*, 17. 119), Alcinous (*Od.* 8. 579-80), and Sirens (*Od.* 12. 189-90). Looking back to the incident ten years after the war, Helen says that she left her home and family because of the '*ἄτη*' sent by Aphrodite (*Od.* 4. 261). Penelope also sees a god's hand and '*ἄτη*' at work in the shameless flight of Helen (*Od.* 23. 222-4).

On the other hand, when we turn our eyes to Olympian scenes, we see the complexity of contending divine interests. Hera and Athena are the principal contrivers of the fall of Troy (*Il.* 4. 20-21, 8. 457-8, 448-9, 18. 364-7). They have even sworn never to save the Trojans under any circumstances (*Il.* 20. 313-317). Troy falls with the trick of the wooden horse inspired by Athena (*Il.* 15. 70-1, *Od.* 8. 493, cf. 13. 386-8) and the Achaeans win the final battle with her aid (*Od.* 8. 519-20). When the two armies have made the truce, it is Hera who angrily opposes the idea of saving Troy by letting it be accomplished (*Il.* 4. 25-9). We know the reason for the hatred of the two goddesses, that is, the judgement of Paris alluded to at *Il.* 24. 29-30.

On the other hand, Zeus, who is supposed to be ultimately responsible for the destiny of Troy, is in fact reluctant to destroy the city as he says in his reply to Hera's protest against the truce criticizing her (*Il.* 4. 31-8):

> Dear lady, what can be all the great evils done to you
> by Priam and the sons of Priam, that you are thus furious
> forever to bring down the strong-founded city of Ilion?
> If you could walk through the gates and through the towering
> ramparts
> and eat Priam and the children of Priam raw, and the other
> Trojans, then, then only might you glut at last your anger.
> Do as you please then. Never let this quarrel hereafter
> be between you and me a bitterness for both of us.

And he goes on to say that since he has yielded to Hera's request this time, she should give way in her turn when he wishes to destroy her favourite city (40-3). Troy is Zeus' favourite, because it is a generous giver of offerings to him (44-9).

Therefore, the Olympian scenario of the Trojan war we see here can be summarized as follows: Paris the prince of Troy hurt the personal pride of Hera and Athena. As the two goddesses demanded retaliation, Zeus reluctantly arranged to destroy the city of Troy.

But is that all that Homer tells us about Zeus' motivation? Here we must examine the much discussed phrase '*Διὸς βουλή*' in the opening sentence of the *Iliad* (1. 1-7):

> Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus' son Achilleus
> and its devastation, which put pains thousandfold upon the
> Achaeans,
> hurled in their multitudes to the house of Hades strong souls
> of heroes, but gave their bodies to be the delicate feasting
> of dogs, of all birds, and the plan of Zeus was accomplished[3]
> since that time when first there stood in division of conflict
> Atreus' son the lord of men and brilliant Achilleus.

'What is this plan of Zeus?', asks G. S. Kirk as he summarizes the problem and gives his answer, 'Probably, as Aristarchus seems to have argued (Arn/A supplemented by D), that implied by Zeus' promise to Thetis at 1. 524-30 to avenge the slight on her son Achilleus by favouring the Trojans. Aristarchus (Arn/A) also criticized the 'fictions' of recent critics, *οἱ νεώτεροι*, chiefly perhaps the idea that Zeus' plan in the *Iliad* was identical with that signified by the same phrase in the post-Homeric *Cypria*, frag. 1. 7, namely to lighten the over-burdened earth by means of heavy casualties at Troy'.[4]

Within the scope of the *Iliad*, Aristarchus may seem right. The same word '*βουλή*' is repeated at the beginning of Book 2 where Zeus

decides on the plan to fulfil his promise to Thetis (1. 537, 540, 2. 4, and in plural '*βουλαί*' at 15. 53-70, though his plans here extend to the fall of Troy itself. cf. also 8. 370). However, the '*βουλή*' of Zeus as the cause of the war itself is not entirely post-Homeric, if we take the Odyssean example of 'Zeus' plans' into our consideration.[5] In Phaeacia, Demodocus the bard sings the episode of the quarrel between Odysseus and Achilles which pleased Agamemnon, because it had been prophesied as a good omen (*Od.* 8. 73-82). The passage closes as follows (79-82):

> for so in prophecy Phoibos Apollo had spoken to him
> in sacred Pytho, when he had stepped across the stone doorstep
> to consult; for now the beginning of evil rolled on, descending
> on Trojans, and on Danaans, through the plans of great Zeus.[6]

According to this account, 'Zeus' plans' — whatever they are — had already been laid down at the preparatory stage of the expedition. Since they are plural 'plans' it is more difficult to reduce them into one particular plan such as his promise to Thetis. They may include a number of casualties, the destruction of Troy, and even the hardship suffered by the Achaeans on their way and at home. Precisely because this passage is not in the *Iliad*, the narrative can put the war in a broader perspective possible only in retrospect to human eyes. All is done and gone — and as looking back, men can only say that everything, after all, was Zeus' plan. The breach of oaths, the abduction of Helen, the judgement of Paris ... each of these events can be a candidate of 'the cause' of the fall of Troy, but the whole plan of Zeus never fits in human logic of morality. If all of these were prompted by some gods, all within the plan of Zeus, there is no point in arguing that the fall of Troy is the punishment of the Trojans for their such and such deed. Zeus' function is much more complicated and his plan much more long-termed than just to prompt or punish one wrongdoing

or two.

This view is further confirmed by putting Troy in its 'historical' context. The current war is not the first Trojan war. The city was once attacked and sacked by Heracles because its former king Laomedon rudely refused to give his horses to Heracles after the latter had done some service for him (*Il.* 5. 638-42, 648-51, 14. 250-1). The king had treated even the gods, Poseidon and Apollo, in the same insolent manner; Poseidon (and Apollo at *Il.* 7. 452) built the city wall of Troy which the god is still proud of despite his hatred towards the Trojans (*Il.* 7. 452-3, 21. 446-7) and Apollo herded the king's cattle (21. 448-9) only to be unrewarded and driven away by the king's threat (21. 450-7). The sack of Troy by Heracles, however, must be considered his personal vengeance rather than the consequence of the general anger of the gods, because, despite this cheating by Laomedon, Apollo has remained favourable towards the Trojans, a fact mysterious to Poseidon (21. 441-3) as well as to the audience. Moreover, Troy has been reinhabited since then and flourishing again. The last blow to the city, even if it was a divine punishment, was not meant to terminate the life of the city entirely. The same is true with the current crisis.[7] As we can overhear from the Olympian conversation over Aeneas, who must be rescued from the hands of Achilles, the coming fall of Troy is not the end of it either (*Il.* 20. 300-8; Poseidon speaking):

> But come, let us ourselves get him away from death, for fear
> the son of Kronos may be angered if now Achilleus
> kills this man. It is destined that he shall be the survivor,
> that the generation of Dardanos shall not die, without seed
> obliterated, since Dardanos was dearest to Kronides
> of all his sons that have been born to him from mortal women.
> For Kronos' son has cursed the generation of Priam,
> and now the might of Aineias shall be lord over the Trojans,

and his sons' sons, and those who are born of their seed hereafter.

We are not told why Zeus hates Priam's lineage — perhaps because of the insolent Laomedon, or because of Paris, or it may only reflect Hera's vote against Priam's family (This word is addressed to Hera, after all). In any case, Zeus' far-reaching plan is laid out already for the re-establishment of the future Troy. Such is the complexity of the 'plan' of Zeus. Within this grand scheme, it is obvious that the fall of Troy is nothing as simple as a punishment for a crime, but an event in the course of history designed far beyond human expectations by Zeus as the distributor of fate.[8]

1) I quote Homeric passages from Richmond Lattimore's translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (University of Chicago Press) with slight modification at times.
2) The comment of Helen at *Il.* 6. 353 and the fact that the word ἄτη is used to describe Paris' conduct (' Ἀλεξάνδρου ἕνεκ' ἄτης' *Il.* 6. 356, 24. 28) do throw some shadow over his future. The same phrase is read in Menelaus' speech at *Il.* 3. 100 by Zenodotus whom Aristarchus criticizes maintaining, 'ἔσται ἀπολογούμενος Μενέλαος ὅτι ἄτηι περιέπεσεν ὁ Ἀλέξανδρος', and reads 'ἀρχῆς' instead of 'ἄτης' cf. W. Leaf (*The Iliad of Homer*, 2nd ed., London, 1900) on *Il.* 3. 100. Aristarchus' interpretation presupposes that ἄτη is a god-sent disaster for which the person hit by it is not entirely responsible, and therefore Menelaus should use a stronger term not involving any divine influence. Against his opinion, Leaf notes, 'ἄτη, however, is often = *sin*, and regarded as deserving moral condemnation; see e. g. I.510-2; and certainly Achilles is not 'apologizing' for Agamemnon in A 412.' They are both making a valid point. ἄτη does come from the gods sometimes (e.g. *Il.* 19. 87-90) and, nevertheless, does not cancel out the responsibility of those who have done something wrong under its influence (e.g. *Il.* 19. 137-8), as Helen knows well. Calling her foolish conduct the 'ἄτη sent from Aphrodite' (*Od.* 4. 261-2) scarcely eases her remorse. However, as in her case, ἄτη does not always attract punishment.
3) *Διὸς δ' ἐτελείετο βουλή*

4) cf. G. S. Kirk (*The Iliad: A Commentary Vol. I: books 1-4*, Cambridge, 1985) on 1. 5.

5) cf. R. Scodel, 'The Achaean wall and the myth of destruction', *HSCP* 86 (1982), 47. Even about the poet of the *Iliad*, we must rather say with Scodel (loc. cit.), 'Homer is not ignorant of the Cyclic and Hesiodic explanation of the war, but he turns them to his own purpose', i.e. by putting the wrath of Achilles, instead of the war as a whole, as the cause of many deaths. For the 'Hesiodic explanation', see fr. 204 (P. Berol. 10560 ed. Schubart–Wilamowitz), lines 95-103 in *OCT* (1970) edited by R. Merkelbach and M. L. West.

6) *Διὸς μεγάλου διὰ βουλάς*

7) We can catch a glimpse of the last day of Troy, on fire from top to bottom (*Il.* 21. 374-6, 22. 410-1). But we are also told what will happen after the war. The gods will destroy the fortification built by the Achaeans, a gloomy reminder of the war, completely to restore the peaceful landscape of Troad (*Il.* 7. 458-63, 12. 17-33) and the glory of the Trojan wall built by Poseidon and Apollo (*Il.* 7. 452-3).

8) cf. Bernard Fenik, *Homer and the Nibelungenlied*, 1986, p. 24.