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## Agamemnon's Test: *Iliad* 2.73–75

πρῶτα δ' ἐγὼν ἔπεσιν πειρήσομαι, ἥ θέμις ἐστί,  
καὶ φεύγειν σὺν νηυσὶ πολυκλήϊσι κελεύσω·  
ὕμεῖς δ' ἄλλοθεν ἄλλος ἐρητύειν ἐπέεσσιν.

(*Iliad*, 2.73–75)

IN HIS RECENT COMMENTARY G. S. Kirk writes a long note to try to make sense of Agamemnon's announcement, quoted above, that he will "first test [the troops] with words" before initiating the battle in which he expects to capture Troy that day (ἤματι κείνῳ, 37).<sup>1</sup> Agamemnon has received a dream from Zeus the night before (Διὸς δέ τοι ἄγγελός εἰμι, 26 = 63) telling him to arm the men and begin the attack, for now finally all Olympus is united on his side (11–13 = 28–30 = 65–67). In the morning he holds a closed meeting of his general staff, to whom he reports verbatim the message of the dream and then adds lines 73–75, the statement about first applying a test.

This passage has never been satisfactorily explained, and Professor Kirk calls the proposed test "quite unexpected."<sup>2</sup> Yet we hear Nestor, speaking in

R.K. would like to dedicate his share of this article to Professor David Daube.

1. *A Commentary to Homer's Iliad, I–IV* (Cambridge, 1985) 122–23.

2. Ibid. M. M. Willcock (*A Companion to the Iliad* [Chicago, 1976] 18) says, "There is some confusion here." Cf. further Cedric Whitman: "The troops do not know what [Agamemnon] is up to—and neither do most of the commentators" (*The Heroic Paradox*, ed. C. Segal [Ithaca, N.Y., 1982] 73). J. T. Sheppard (*The Pattern of the Iliad* [London, 1922] 26) saw Agamemnon's conduct as the "sign of a disturbed mind. . . . He is in the grip of *Ate*." Richmond Lattimore thinks he has "believed his own falsehoods" (*The Iliad of Homer* [Chicago, 1959] 49). Other critics have appreci-

reply to Agamemnon, express considerable astonishment at the message of the dream (80–81), but none whatsoever at the further proposal of testing the men first—about which, as Kirk observes, the dream itself had said nothing. The possibility Kirk holds out, that Agamemnon's test may be understood in connection with Odysseus's famous and seemingly gratuitous testing of his father on returning to Ithaca (*Od.* 24.239ff.), is of no use. This latter episode is, of course, a peculiar and intimate expression of Odysseus's character, whereas Agamemnon's testing is, as he indicates, a matter here of fixed public *rule*—which is presumably why the proposal causes no surprise to Nestor or the other high counselors.

Agamemnon's testing is not quite as absurd as Kirk supposes. Agamemnon does not, in the hour before what he understands will be the decisive, victorious battle of the war, simply "order" (Kirk's word) his army to sail home. He "urges" or "bids" (κελεύσω, 74) the men to go, bidding them be "persuaded" that they cannot win (πειθώμεθα πάντες, 139), and that they should give up and take the coward's way out (φεύγωμεν, 140). If Agamemnon's maneuver appears inexplicable, it is because Homer, assuming we already understand, does not trouble to underscore the setting of this test or make explicit the *themis* on which it is based.

Readers of the Bible will sense what institution and setting have come into play here: it is the dismissal of cowards from the assembled ranks of the army immediately prior to engagement in Holy War. We see the rule at work in the famous story of Gideon in the Book of Judges, chapter 7, and it is given legislative form in Deuteronomy 20:8.<sup>3</sup> Classicists will doubtless be reluctant to

ated the irony inherent in the fact that Agamemnon's test turns into a testing of his own leadership (e.g., C. R. Beye, *The Iliad, the Odyssey, and the Epic Tradition* [Garden City, N.Y., 1966] 123), but find his maneuver "totally implausible, awkwardly worked in" (ibid.; cf. J. C. Hogan, *A Guide to the Iliad* [Garden City, N.Y., 1979] 92): "Why Agamemnon adds this proposal is hard to say". E. T. Owen (*The Story of the Iliad* [Ann Arbor, 1966] 21) looks for a motive grounded in narrative impact on the audience: Homer "wishes to surprise his audience, to give them something to wonder at, and want to hear the outcome of." The most sophisticated explanation in terms of Homeric narrative strategy is that of Cedric Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958) 58 with n. 13: Agamemnon states "the opposite of what he hopes and believes to be true, to see if the gods will intervene," a kind of divination by opposites, of which Whitman claims *Odyssey* 15.521 to be the closest example (Telemachus calls Eurymachus the man most likely to succeed his father as king in order to solicit the omen that follows and points to the contrary). Whitman is right to say that Agamemnon means the opposite of what he proposes in the speech to his men. But there is no further omen for the king to solicit, since he has just been sent a complete and clear verbal message from Zeus (as we have thrice heard: 11–13 = 28–30 = 65–67). Telemachus, who has heard nothing and feels forsaken and forgotten, is making a sad last appeal. In short, the theological situation (not to mention the religious disposition) of Agamemnon is diametrically opposite that of Telemachus. Agamemnon's test is directed at the men, not at heaven. He characterizes the test as θέμις, and this is what has to be explained. Cf. W. Donlan, "Homer's Agamemnon," *CW* 65 (1971) 111–12; and Eric Vogelin, *Order and History II, The World of the Polis* (Baton Rouge, La., 1957) 80–81.

3. In Deuteronomy and Homer the test and dismissal of cowards is administered by way of public address. In Judges 7 we have as well the arcane command to bring the men down to the river to see how they drink: *vide* David Daube, "Gideon's Few," *Journal of Jewish Studies* (1956) 155–

apply the notion of “Holy War” to the well-greaved Achaeans, but the Holy Wars of ancient Israel are not to be anachronistically confused with medieval crusades or the Thirty Years’ War: they did not necessarily entail war against the *religion* of the enemy.<sup>4</sup> The definition of Holy War did not require infidels. It required simply that the summons to war—and thus the assurance of victory—come from God Himself. This is precisely what has occurred in Agamemnon’s dream.

It is Agamemnon’s dream that creates the new circumstance for the battle he is now ordered to initiate, different from the previous nine years of intermittent engagement. At this moment it becomes Holy War, and a fundamental rule of Holy War imposes itself: the dismissal in shame of any cowards, of any who have no heart for the battle or no faith in the god commanding it.<sup>5</sup> Agamemnon’s decision to test the men first is not the impulse of erratic generalissimo, but compulsory *themis*.<sup>6</sup>

61. The fundamental book on *Holy War* in the Bible is Gerhard von Rad, *Der heilige Krieg im alten Israel* (Zurich, 1951). F. Schwally, *Semitische Kriegsaltertümer* I (Leipzig, 1901) 96–98, is an early attempt to point to the anthropological setting. Manfred Weippert, “‘Heiliger Krieg’ in Israel und Assyrien: Kritische Anmerkungen zu Gerhard von Rads Konzept . . .,” *Zeitschrift für Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* (1972) 460–93 is in search of extra-Biblical parallels, and though he cites nothing specific to Dt. 20:8 and no Homeric verse, his sweeping conclusion (p. 485) may be heard: “wer also von ‘Jahwekrieg’ spricht, muss ebenso von Assurkrieg oder Istarkrieg reden, und man braucht nur an die homerischen Epen oder römische Kriegspraktiken zu denken, um noch weitere Termini dieser Art hinzubilden zu können. In Wirklichkeit reden wir hier von gemeinorientalischer, ja gemeinantiker Kriegspraxis und -ideologie.” Unfortunately, there is no discussion of Hittite material in this connection. We must hope for scholars of Hittite languages and sources to look for instances where a great god summons soldiers to victory. Fritz Stolz (*Jahwes und Israels Kriege*, Abhandlungen zur Theologie des Alten und Neuen Testaments 60 [Zurich, 1972] 27, cf. 119) is undecided whether to regard the rule in Dt. 20:8 as a literary invention of Deuteronomy or a reformation of more ancient traditional practice. The first view is unambiguously held by Alexander Rofé, “The Laws of War in Deuteronomy: Their Origin, Intention and Positivity,” *Zion* 39 (1974) 143–56 (in Hebrew with English summary). Rad’s caveat (*op. cit.* 72) applies here: “Indessen ist zu fragen, ob etwas, das literarisch sekundär ist, auch in der Geschichte eine zweitrangige oder problematische Existenz haben muss. Sind doch schon die literarkritischen Urteile von den Formgeschichtlichen zu trennen, denn selbst hinter späten und ausgesprochen theoretisierenden Texten sind wirklich geübte kultische Bräuche zum Vorschein gekommen.” Indeed, the question of what is ideal construct and what is actual practice is just as tricky when put to “the Trojan War.”

4. Rad (*supra* n. 3) 32.

5. Ibid. 47: “Am alten heiligen Krieg konnten nur Gläubige teilnehmen. Mit ihren Glauben trugen sie von Anfang bis zum Ende das Geschehen.” David Daube (“The Culture of Deuteronomy,” *Orita* 3 [Ibadan, 1969] 29) alerts us to the rule’s efficacy as an appeal to the sense of shame. The permission for cowards to be dismissed is preceded by the divine assurance of victory (Dt. 20:8 is preceded by the assurance of Dt. 20:3–4). “After this, it is surely evident that disgrace awaits whoever slips away from faintheartedness and fear. Conversely, glory will be in store for those who, though offered the opportunity of opting out, do stay to fight: acceptance, favour, honour are the great rewards in a shame culture.” As we shall see, Agamemnon’s speech to the men is an extremely subtle (in the event, oversubtle) attempt to exploit the “shame-cultural” nature of the rule against its theological premise of full confidence in the divinity.

6. The same *themis* is probably alluded to again in the grand digression by which Nestor insinuates his fateful proposal to Patroclus in Book 11. Reminiscing on his part long ago in the wars

At the end of a subtle examination of the story in Judges of Gideon's test of his forces before battle with the Midianites, Professor David Daube notes, "We must remember that oracles often fell in with the plans of him in charge."<sup>7</sup> What we have in Homer in the passage under notice is the clear-sighted observation of how Agamemnon seeks to make his way around the rule that, being commanded by Zeus to attack in reliance on the united support of Olympus, he must first dismiss any cowards, any unwilling warriors, from the ranks of his army. The event is comic; Agamemnon is made a fool of, and the poet allows us to see far more of the human chicanery that can go on in the application of the high rules of war and religion than Judges or Deuteronomy would grant us. The scene reaches its climax in what can almost be called cartoon comedy, with Agamemnon left presiding before a cloud of suspended dust as the men have all instantly rushed off to the boats to go home; and the "cry that reaches heaven" is in this case not a blood-curdling war cry against Troy, but the joy of the Achaeans under the impression that they are being allowed to call the whole thing off (149–54).

Uplifted as he is by the message from Zeus, Agamemnon is nonetheless loath to risk losing a single man in the required dismissal of cowards. In the closed session with his chief counselors Agamemnon had reported the divine message, announced that he would apply the consequent test in the form of a public speech, and then ordered that they, his captains in the know, should position themselves in the assembly *to make sure no one actually left* (75). Agamemnon is the commander of an invasionary force that for nine years has been virtually confined to its initial beachhead. He will now go into battle without Achilles, and he means not to lose another man. His sense of weakness insufficiently relieved by religion, he hatches an unmitigated deception.

We know from having heard the dream message three times that Agamemnon's grand address is a brazen lie from top to bottom. He formally gives out to the men as their commander's considered assessment of Zeus' will in this war

between the Epeians and his own Pylians, he tells how the enemy was massing against the frontier town of Thryoessa, but Athens herself came to summon up a Pylian army to the rescue (11.714–17):

ἄμμι δ' Ἀθήνη  
 ἄγγελος ἦλθε θεοῦσ' ἀπ' Ὀλύμπου θωρήσσεσθαι  
 ἐννυχος, οὐδ' ἀέκοντα Πύλον κάτα λαὸν ἀγειρεν,  
 ἀλλὰ μάλ' ἐσσυμένους πολεμίζειν.

Athena acts as a "nocturnal messenger" of her own and Zeus's summons; we are presumably to understand that she came to Neleus in a dream, like the dream sent to Agamemnon. Nothing is said of a test, but the emphasis over the two lines that Athena's summons "gathered from across Pylos" what is "not an unwilling army, but men eager to fight," certainly leaves ample room for the exclusion or dismissal of the unwilling.

7. "Gideon's Few" (*supra* n. 3) 160.

precisely the opposite of what the dream messenger had said (114–15). It is a classic case of manipulation, for he is really trying to stir the men to do the opposite of what he is ostensibly proposing. He underscores with all due clarity consistent with the fraud that he himself approves of this step, that in going home now he and they will be disgraced in the eyes of their women, children, and future generations (119–22). The height of Agamemnon's eloquence is attained in the elaborate, imaginative, circumstantial way he conveys to the troops that, as far as the Trojans proper are concerned, exclusive of allies, the Achaeans outnumber them ten to one (123–30). In fact, alluding to the original omens at the departure of the expedition, Agamemnon's claim that it is evident now that what Zeus had then promised and "nodded assent to" (κατένευσεν, 112) was only a "cheat" (ἄπατην, 114) is patently meant to be so offensive, so flagrantly contradictory to religious axiom<sup>8</sup> as to provoke indignation and protest. With his culminating exhortation, πειθόμεθα πάντες (139), "let us all be persuaded" to decamp and go home, Agamemnon is directly soliciting a response from the men—namely, outraged rejection of his invitation to shame. (Perhaps his captains sprinkled in the assembly were to have been of better help here, but things moved too quickly.)

Agamemnon's scheme is to turn the required dismissal of cowards into the proposition that *the entire army* take dismissal in this way. He could, of course, have proudly broadcast to all the men the great summons and promise from Zeus he actually received, and then parenthetically have bid anyone craven enough among them to slink off in shame even in the eyes of children and grandchildren: such soldiers are not needed when all Olympus is on our side! Doing so, however, Agamemnon would be tipping off the men that at this point by religious law they do in fact individually have the choice whether to leave or to stay.<sup>9</sup> In proposing instead, "let us all slink off in disgrace, we can never prevail against the Trojans, Zeus has abandoned us," he is sticking to the letter of the law, inviting cowards to leave; but by withholding from the men the premise of the offer of dismissal (Zeus's command to battle and assurance of victory) he expects he is withholding the possibility of the offer's being accepted. Not only can the men not recognize application here of the *themis* in question, but the arguments Agamemnon presents make it only sensible for the whole army to give up the fight. He does this with the calculation that, since it is inconceivable, of course, that the entire army should admit failure and accept disgrace, therefore every

8. Cf. Zeus's words at 1.526–27:

οὐ γὰρ ἐμὸν παλινάγρετον οὐδ' ἀπατηλὸν  
οὐδ' ἀτελεύτητον, ὃ τί κεν κεφαλῇ καταεύσω.

9. The men's confidence in the deity summoning them to battle is inextricable from their confidence in the veracity of the leader reporting the deity's will, and in this regard it was noticeable (79) that not even Agamemnon's best supporter, Nestor, believed easily in his dream.



man in the army—the dismissal of cowards having been offered and rebuffed *en masse*—will be consequently bound to persevere. It is a magnificent instance of twisting the law without breaking it. To evade the legal consequence of the principle that gods do not want or need unwilling warriors in their armies, Agamemnon has translated the promise of victory he received from Olympus into the public announcement “Zeus has forsaken us.”

The climax of the episode is the men’s response to Agamemnon’s grand deception. Naturally, therefore, Homer delays revealing just what that response is for seven lines, during which we are given similes of the winds rippling the sea or a field of ripe corn to describe the army’s taking in what Agamemnon has propounded (142–49). These similes might signify as well the intake of breath for the resounding “No” Agamemnon is counting on. But then Homer does indicate that the mass assembly has heard just what it wanted to hear, and Agamemnon’s machination backfires in a cloud of dust.

Forty lines later, as the work of putting the war back on track is just getting under way, Odysseus is collaring soldiers left and right.<sup>10</sup> We may laugh again as he must stiffly explain to one departing officer who he knows is no coward, “You have not yet clearly perceived the mind of the son of Atreus” (192). The lord of men will be angry that the sons of the Achaeans have taken him at his word. The debacle is only resolved three hundred lines after the dust cloud by means of the more magical dashing around of Athene, who pours into each Achaean warrior’s heart (ἐκάστω . . . καρδίῃ, 451) the inspiration that it is sweeter to fight the war than to sail back to his own fatherland. Agamemnon’s manipulation to make the

10. A preliminary reader for this journal points to Odysseus’s ringing aphorism: οὐκ ἀγαθὸν πολυκοιρανίῃ· εἷς κοίρανος ἔστω (204), and the light hand with which Homer indicates that it is in fact only Odysseus (on behalf of Agamemnon, to be sure) who is the one exercising command in his effort to roll back the anarchy caused by the one high commander’s grand address: ὥς ὃ γέ κοιρανέων διέπε στρατόν (207). Odysseus’s aphorism had an important subsequent history. Placed on the crest of an impassioned summation against dualism in Book 12 of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*, it further became an elegant feature of Jewish and Christian vindications of monotheism (Erik Peterson, “Der Monotheismus als Politisches Problem,” *Theologische Traktate* [Munich, 1950] 49, 65. We thank Prof. Gerard Casparly for the reference and discussion). This subsequent history of the line reinforces the likelihood of its having had a considerable prehistory, for it is precisely as an *aphorism* or *proverb* that it has its effect in Homer’s tale. The desirability of one ruler rather than many is clearly not a perception to which Odysseus has just attained at this moment while actually observing Agamemnon at work. It is a preexisting argument he seizes upon in the crisis, and only therefore can it have its amusing, ironic, secondary effect. David Daube has noted that a very similar adage is voiced in Judges 9:2 at the end of the saga of Gideon, in which we first observed dismissal of cowards (*Sons and Strangers* [Boston, 1984] 5). In his polygamous time Gideon has had seventy sons, who now inherit his tremendous authority and esteem. He has also left one illegitimate son, Abimelek, by a Canaanite concubine. Abimelek persuades the Shechemites (Canaanites) to join in a massacre of the seventy and make him king: *mah tov lakem hamashol bakem shiv 'im 'ish kol bene Yerubaal 'im meshol bakem 'ish 'ehad* (“What good for you is the rule of seventy men, all the sons of [Gideon] over you, if ruling by one man over you [is available]?”). The nearness of this line to *Iliad* 2.204, not only in content but in phrasing, is astonishing. Odysseus has in fact supplied the proverbial answer to Abimelek’s rhetorical question: “What good [*mah tov*]?” “No good [οὐκ ἀγαθόν]!”



divine message fall in with his own interest has led to the perfect disintegration of the broad army of the Achaeans. (The mordant backtalk of Thersites exemplifies the disintegration.) It must be reconstituted piecemeal, man by man. The Catalogue of Ships is a fitting coda to this work of repair, so that at the beginning of Book 3 things are back to the state they were in before Zeus sent Agamemnon the dream.

Agamemnon's test, then, is the complicating incident of a rich and long delaying episode in the tale of the war, and we carry away from it impressions that should color what is to come. Zeus had calculated how to fulfill his thunderous, firm promise to Thetis (1.505ff.) and sent false assurances and a direct order to Agamemnon to attack the Trojans; Agamemnon, calculating for his part how even better to assure the success of the attack, then delivered his address to the troops with the consequence that the calculations of both failed. Indeed, when battle finally is joined—not, in fact, until the end of Book 4—it is, of course, not at all at the signal of Agamemnon at the command of Zeus, but at the “thoughtless” (ἄφρονι, 4.104) and misguided (4.129–30) bowshot of the Trojan archer Pandarus. Although Homer reminds us even as Agamemnon's army is dissolving that this war is fated to be fought to its well-known conclusion (2.155–56), he has had us observe, by way of introduction before we see fighting, that the war nevertheless escapes the control and calculation of even the most supreme commanders.

But quite apart from the early light this episode sheds on the story as a whole, and quite apart from the larger issues that the episode introduces—the extent, for instance, to which Agamemnon is being inadvertently truthful in deviously proposing that Zeus is a cheat, or the irony of the chief god's deception failing because of the chief king's lack of faith—what we have on the simplest level is an extended political exposé. Consider the splendid formality of the convocation (96–98), and the magnificent scepter that commands the attention of the audience for ten lines (100–109). Then consider the enormity of solemn deceit, on the highest authority and in the name of religion, that the poet lays bare for us in this primordial public assembly.

To conclude: it is our contention that the *themis* in line 73 refers to a rule very similar to Dt. 20:8, because this hypothesis makes clear sense of the episode in all detail. The existence of such a rule in both Homer and the Bible may be explained perhaps by the impingement of a common third cultural force (see n. 3) or by the inherent theological and anthropological cogency of the rule in question. (Gods tend to require willing subjection from their protégés; an impasse in warfare—which might occasion a god to step in and take command—may well require the tradeoff of sheer numbers of soldiers for the heightened courage or fanaticism of a self-selecting élite.) As we could expect, the treatment of the rule is radically different in the Bible and in Homer. Nevertheless, the hypothesis that it is essentially the same rule makes clear and

direct sense of the entire episode of Agamemnon's Test in all detail. We therefore reject the standard explanation toward which Professor Kirk inclines in a further note,<sup>11</sup> that the test follows the dream only because of the awkward, illogical conflation of variant versions available in the epic tradition.<sup>12</sup>

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11. *Commentary* (*supra* n. 1) 124–25, note to line 86.

12. See Walter Leaf, ed., *The Iliad* I (London, 1900) 46–47; and E. R. Dodds, "Homer," in *Fifty Years of Classical Scholarship*, ed. M. Platnauer (Oxford, 1954), 16.

### CORRECTION

In the April 1989 issue of **Classical Antiquity**, (Volume 8, No. 1), the last line of text on page 87 should read:

"...creatures should be understood as attributes or domesticated companions of the goddess in her..."