

“I Will Be A Deceiving Spirit”: Divine Misdirection in Ancient Mediterranean Religion

Believers in the gods of ancient Mediterranean cultures understood that messages from their gods might lead them astray with regard to future action. While human interpretive error was often considered the cause for an apparent case of a god misleading a mortal (as with, for instance, Croesus’ misreading of the meaning of the oracle he received from Delphi), there are a handful of narratives in which a god is portrayed as actively and intentionally misleading a mortal. In this paper, I will examine two parallel cases of this occurrence, one from Greek literature and one from Israelite literature.

Taking place near the beginning of one of the most widely-read works of Greek literature, the account of Agamemnon’s false dream as sent by Zeus at the opening of *Iliad* 2 is a well-known tale in which Zeus actively misleads the Greek military commander in order to achieve his own ends. Tucked into the historical account of the kings of Israel in the Hebrew Bible and perhaps less well-treated yet still famous in its own right, the account of the prophet Micaiah’s identification of a false message sent from the Hebrew God to King Ahab in *1 Kings* 22 resulting in a military blunder on Ahab’s part contains abundant parallels with the story from *Iliad* 2. Together, these two stories offer a multicultural glimpse into beliefs about the nature and purpose of potential divine misdirection.

Parallels abound between the accounts in *Iliad* 2 and *1 Kings* 22. The fundamental similarity lies in the fact that a human military conflict is impacted and indeed covertly directed by a supreme heavenly deity. Yet rather than simply using his overwhelming power to create the outcome he wants, the supreme deity considers alternative options to bring about the desired result. In each case, he ultimately chooses misdirection as carried out through an intermediary

rather than a personal intervention. In Iliad 2, Zeus sends a false dream with directions to announce a deceptive message to Agamemnon at night, while in 1 Kings 22 God sends a “deceiving spirit” to enter the minds of the prophetic cadre of King Ahab. In both cases, the intention of the message is the same: the deity wishes the king to engage in battle despite the fact that such an action will prove detrimental to the king, as the deity well knows. The deity’s plans call for the defeat of the king in the subsequent battle after the king is seduced by the false message from the deity. In both cases, the king ultimately deems the message to be trustworthy, although it is also the case that the king *wishes* to believe that he has divine support to engage in battle. The story then unfolds in a manner that is beneficial to the deity’s wishes but decidedly less so to the interests of the human king.

While differences between these two accounts also exist (as to be discussed in the paper), the similarities are striking. In sum, the two accounts provide an extraordinary window into ancient Mediterranean thinking on the possibility of divine misdirection in a crucial situation. To paraphrase an ancient phrase: if the gods be against us, who can be for us?

Bibliography

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