

## Aeneas, Odysseus, and the Problem of Divine Hiddenness

In the first book of Vergil's *Aeneid*, after Venus, transforming as she turns to go, reveals to Aeneas that the "Tyrian maiden" he has just been talking with is his own goddess mother, the hero complains, *Quid natum totiens, crudelis tu quoque, falsis | ludis imaginibus? Cur dextrae iungere dextram | non datur, ac veras audire et reddere voces?* "Why do you cruelly mock your son so many times with false images? Why is it not granted to me to join my right hand with yours and to hear and reply to your true voice?" (1.406-408). Aeneas, to any reader's mind, has a right to complain: what loving mother would not just speak plainly to her son? What was the point of the disguise if not to needlessly prevent the kind of open, face-to-face dialog a hero might have with a goddess, particularly one who is his loving mother? However, before this complaint, he has others: *Sum pius Aeneas, [ . . . ] | [ . . . ] | Bis denis Phrygium conscendi navibus aequor, | matre dea monstrante viam, data fata secutus; | vix septem convolsae undis Euroque supersunt. | Ipse ignotus, egens, Libyae deserta peragro | Europa atque Asia pulsus...* "I am pious Aeneas . . . With twenty ships I embarked on the Phrygian sea, my goddess mother showing the way, following the fates that were given; scarcely seven convulsed by the waves and Eurys survive. I myself unknown, needy, traverse the deserts of Libya, driven from Europe and Asia..." (1.378, 381-385). Venus has no patience for this and interrupts his complaining (1.385-388). Even before revealing that she has been disguised this whole time, Venus refuses to let him indulge his complaints and gives him only enough information for the next step of his journey. Although Jupiter has a massive, detailed divine plan for his life and for his descendants which the Venus of Book 1 is well aware of, Aeneas himself is made privy to it only in bits and pieces; the parceled-out commands, instructions, and prophecies in Books 2-3 illustrate this.

Aeneas is struggling with a version of a concept familiar to modern philosophy and theology: the problem of divine hiddenness. J. L. Schellenberg developed this concept as an argument against the existence of God (Schellenberg 1993, 83). However, for Aeneas, it is not a question of whether Venus or any other of the individual gods *exist* (he can hardly doubt that), but whether the Divine, in a larger sense, rules the universe in an orderly way and loves and rewards *pietas*. Venus herself asks this question to Jupiter: *Hic pietatis honos?* “Is this the honor given to piety?” (1.253) referring to fact that Aeneas has, once again, been driven off course. Jupiter’s answer is of course that his resolve remains unchanged and Aeneas’ destiny is to become a god himself, but Aeneas himself does not have any such definite assurance. He cannot reliably speak to the divine face-to-face.

Aeneas is not the only hero who faces the problem of divine hiddenness. Homer’s Odysseus also encounters difficulty and disappointment unaware that he has the king of the gods and a goddess at his back. Zeus has decreed that he will get home, and Athena advocates for him in Book 1, the intertext for Vergil’s scene between Venus and Jupiter in his first book. Athena also informs Odysseus in Book 13 that she is Pallas Athena, ἢ τέ τοι αἰεὶ | ἐν πάντεσσι πόνοισι παρίσταμαι ἠδὲ φυλάσσω, “I who always stand by you and guard you in all your toils” (*Od.* 13.300-301), despite the fact that she hardly seems to have helped him at all in the previous four books in which he recounts his adventures. However, the narrator of Books 9-12 is Odysseus himself, who is, unlike the Homeric bard, unaware of the action on the divine plane. Nevertheless, hints of possible divine action in his favor lurk in the background: the olive wood stake used against Polyphemus’ eye, the miraculous appearance of Hermes to help Odysseus avoid being enchanted by Circe, the sleep Odysseus falls into while praying on the Island of the

Sun which protects him from his men's folly. Only back on Ithaca, however, does Athena reveal herself and her plan fully.

This paper will argue that Vergil takes what is a minor motif in Homer's *Odyssey* and makes it a significant theme of the "Odyssey" portion of the *Aeneid*, Books 1-6. It will further explore the similarity of Vergil's depiction of the problem of divine hiddenness with other ancient examples of the motif from works such as the biblical Books of Job and Isaiah.

#### Work Cited

Schellenberg, J. L. 1993. *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.