

# Comparison of job and odysseus

Profession



The agency of Job and Odysseus is controlled by God and the gods. Neither Job nor Odysseus have agency when the gods are against them. The relationship between the divine and human agency is a well-established one in both the ancient Hebrew and ancient Greek cultures. Many acts that could be attributed to human agency are often credited to gods, especially human errors or misdeeds. Humans try to forfeit a good deal of their agency to the gods willingly. Nevertheless the gods have no reservations about revoking agency from humans. Neither Job nor Odysseus had agency when a god was against them.

Job has no agency, no participation in God's decision to make him the object of a wager. God does not give him the option to decline and he is presented with no opportunity in which he might refuse God outright. He has no control over the duration or intensity of his suffering. He is completely at the mercy of God.

There is nothing to give an indication of how much agency Job had before the wager. However the arguments Job makes in chapter three through thirty-seven suggest some agency, especially in his questioning of God: 'Does it seem good to thee to oppress, to despise the work of thy hands and favor the designs of the wicked? Are thy days as the days of man, or thy years as man's years, that thou dost seek out my iniquity and search for my sin, although thou knowest that I am not guilty, and there is none to deliver out of thy hand?'; (Job, chapter 10, verses 3, 5-7). We will assume Job has as much agency as one could who was 'blameless and upright, one who feared God, and turned away from evil'; (Job, chapter 1, verse 1).

The events that destroy Job's property and children seem to be agency

limiting by their very nature. To Job, the entire chain of incidents must have appeared as a string of unfortunate coincidences. There was no element of predictability, no chance for Job to prepare for or thwart Satan's plan. Job was blindsided. His agency was restricted by his limited knowledge of what was happening around him. The events Satan chose as a means to obliterate Job's possessions and his children, were random and uncontrollable for Job. There was no room for any expression of agency on his part. Job's statement at the end of chapter one suggests that Job, maybe, did not want to be attributed with very much agency: 'the Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord'; (verse 21).

Job has, if this is possible, an even lesser degree of agency after Satan afflicts him with sores. Before this, though he suffered great loss, he still maintained the ability to direct himself by means of his physical body. Now however, God, by placing Job in Satan's power, removes that part of his agency. He is too miserable to move and because of this, he has no choice but to listen and argue with the comforters. For all we know, if Job had been able to walk away, he might have. However, he was not able to leave because his agency was now limited by the random events of destruction and his physical debilitation.

Job is a man very limited by God. As illustrated, he has only a negligible amount of agency to begin with. By the time God and Satan finish with him, he has virtually no control over his own life. The fragment of agency he does cling to is his ability to choose whether or not to curse God. No one, except himself, could prevent Job from cursing God. Yet, he refuses to curse God, even though He is responsible for his suffering.

Odysseus is very much a part of his own loss of agency. It stems from his encounter with Poseidon's son, Polyphemos. Until then, it was clear that Odysseus was in control of his life, as much as any man can be in control. He used his battle prowess and words as expressions of this agency he possessed. After the confrontation with Polyphemos, Odysseus' words and skills were no longer effective as a means of control.

Because of Polyphemos' curse, Odysseus could no longer maintain his agency using his skills as a battle chief. We saw in the Trojan War how Odysseus used his cleverness to outsmart the Trojans and then his fighting skills to take their lives. This technique of using his prowess as a means of preserving his agency collapsed under pressure from Poseidon. In book five, as he was on his way home from Kalypso's island, Poseidon sent a massive hurricane against him. For all his strength, power, and skill, Odysseus was powerless to stop the storm or even save himself. His agency was overcome by Poseidon's will.

Poseidon took away Odysseus' use of words as a means of expressing his agency. Teiresias instructs Odysseus to distance his men from Helios' cattle. Odysseus uses words as an attempt to persuade them to bypass the island completely: 'Shipmates;#8230; I had forewarning from Teiresias and Kirke, too; both told me I must shun this island of the Sun, the world's delight. Nothing but fatal trouble shall we find here'; (book XII, lines 350-354). He again tries to assert some of his agency on the crew with words when he commands his men to swear to him they will not eat the cattle. In the past, this verbal control would have been enough to ensure his agency and

preservation. The fact that it fails in these two incidents is an indication of Poseidon's influence on Odysseus' loss of agency.

Odysseus' loss of agency created a loss of agency for his crewmembers. Polyphemos' curse on Odysseus, enforced by Poseidon, was this: 'Should destiny intend that he shall see his roof again among his family in his father land, far be that day and dark the years between. Let him lose all his companions'; (book IX, lines 580-584). This curse positioned Poseidon against Odysseus, and therefore against his men. This serves to illustrate the consequences loss of agency can have and how far reaching they can be. Odysseus' men did nothing to offend Poseidon. They begged Odysseus not to further enrage Polyphemos. As a result of Odysseus' ego, he lost his agency and he lost the agency of his men, and subsequently, their lives.

'Your voyage here was cursed by heaven!';, said Aiolos in book ten, line eighty-five. If we consider what we know about the relationship between Odysseus and Poseidon, it becomes clearer that Odysseus' trial and tribulations on his voyage home are more than mere coincidence. Poseidon has a master plan, in which, Odysseus is meant to have as little agency as possible. He accomplishes this through a series of misadventures involving Odysseus and his men: the loss of the winds, his experiences with the Lotus Eaters and the Laistrygonians, the temptations of Kirke, the danger of Kharybdis and Skylla. All of these misfortunes occur on account of the previous incident: Odysseus was driven from Aiolos to the Laistrygonians to Kirke, all by some simple twist of fate or by the stupidity of his men. It was not fate and his men's stupidity was not arbitrary; it was Poseidon. It was his wish that Odysseus not see his homeland for many years and so Odysseus

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was forced into Poseidon's obstacle course, turning corners blindly, not because he wants to, but because he has to.

The stories of Job and Odysseus tell a similar tale of agency and the gods. Both have their agency greatly reduced as a result of a god's wish. Job can do nothing more than speak, which, though it is not a substantial amount of agency, it is greater than that of Odysseus: his once valued words are now useless to him. Neither Job nor Odysseus are able to control the length or intensity of their suffering. Job suffers until the wager is fulfilled, with no way to ease or stop the pain. Odysseus endures his hardships and strife until Poseidon is appeased. The most prominent similarity is that they both experience a loss of agency because of a god.

There is one significant difference that stands out between Job and Odysseus. That is the reason for their loss of agency and suffering. The reason in for Odysseus' torment is obvious: he blinded Poseidon's son. How anyone could not expect some form of vengeance, and sometimes I get the feeling Odysseus is caught unaware by Poseidon, is a mystery to me. The rationale behind Job's reduction in agency is much less clear and is never addressed by God, who was an accessory to the whole affair by knowingly allowing it to take place. The comforters suggest possible explanations, unhidden sin or a lesson from God, but neither suggestions are confirmed or denied. The reason God accepted Satan's wager remains a playground for speculation.

When the plans of the gods, or God, are against them, neither Odysseus nor Job have control over the direction their lives take. They can only contemplate why it is happening and wait for it to end. Of course, once

peace is made with the gods, agency is restored and Job and Odysseus return to the lives waiting and watching, for it is the divine that controls their agency.