

# To obey or disobey: the role of obedience in the iliad and genesis 1-25

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



Even though they were written in the same period of time, the Iliad (written c. 700 BC) and Genesis (compiled between 900 and 400 BC) exhibit many differences in their concepts of obedience. While the Iliad often condones men who disobey, Genesis condemns any man who does not obey the word of God with a harsh punishment. The contrasting ideas of obedience in the two books is important and relevant for the reader today in the light that Genesis has become the cornerstone for a major world religion while the Iliad has remained only at the epic poetry level. Obedience in Genesis is clearly a paramount and straightforward concept. Throughout this book, God creates men who disobey him and are therefore punished. Those who do not disobey him are saved from his wrath. The idea of disobedience is embodied by Adam and Eve. The first man and the first woman demonstrate that it is human nature to disobey, and that God does not like mistakes. There is nothing in Genesis that suggests that God admires the rebel or the free-thinker; he does not admire Adam and Eve for their boldness and courage to disobey God. Instead, God expects a blind faith and obedience from men to carry out God's demands. Blind faith is exemplified in Genesis by those who are eventually exalted by God, specifically Noah and Abraham. Genesis does not directly state why Noah was the only man alive who found favor in the sight of the Lord<sup>2</sup> (Gen. 6. 8) but the reader can safely assume that Noah has always been obedient of God. In any case, Noah immediately obeys God's orders to build an ark (Gen. 6. 22), even though this ark would symbolize Noah's belief in the destruction of the rest of mankind. Noah's blind faith in God is rewarded greatly because Noah becomes the new Adam, or a symbol of the rebirth of mankind. God says to Noah<sup>3</sup> Be fruitful and multiply and fill

the earth<sup>2</sup> (Gen. 9. 1). This is Noah<sup>1</sup>'s compensation for his obedience to God<sup>1</sup>'s orders. Likewise, when God orders the sacrifice of Isaac, the Lord is met with the same unwavering faith and obedience from Abraham. When God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, he uses a tone which can be described as taunting, as though he is trying to anger Abraham so that he will disobey God. When God says <sup>3</sup>Take your son, your only son Isaac, who you love...<sup>2</sup> (Gen. 22. 2) the reader can see that God emphasizes to Abraham that Isaac is his only son and that Abraham loves his son. Despite the fact that it appears as though God is mocking him, Abraham does not question his command. Instead, he sets off to kill his son, and is stopped by an angel right before the knife cuts into Isaac. For his unquestioning devotion Abraham is also granted many descendants by God. Unlike Genesis, the Iliad is much less clear as to whether disobedience is a completely evil concept. When the gods are made angry by the acts of humans, they are much less straightforward about why they are angry than the God in Genesis. For example, in Book One, when Apollo is angered because Agamemnon has not accepted the ransom for Chryse<sup>1</sup>'s daughter, he does not speak directly to Agamemnon about it. Instead, Apollo shoots plague-inflicted arrows upon the Argives for nine days. When the men want to know what they have done wrong to anger the gods, they cannot ask the gods directly. Instead they must rely on men who can interpret the signs of birds, in this case, Kalchas ( 1. 69). Since Kalchas is a mere human, however, he is subject to the doubt and questionings of other humans. After he has told the Greeks why the plague has been inflicted upon them, Agamemnon still doubts him and wants to disobey his suggestions. Agamemnon attempts to discredit Kalchas by

sneering <sup>3</sup>Seer of evil: never yet have you told me a good thing<sup>2</sup> (, 1. 106). The indirect relationship between gods and humans makes it difficult for the human characters, as well as the reader, to discern what the gods consider to be disobedience and what they attribute to human ignorance. In Genesis, however, ignorance is no excuse for not obeying the law. Even though Eve has been tricked into eating from the forbidden tree, God does not have compassion for her ignorance. Instead he curses women forever with difficult childbirth and submission to men (Gen. 3. 16). In a way, Achilles<sup>1</sup> disobedience of Agamemnon also leads to punishment. Since Achilles refuses to fight because of his anger at Agamemnon, his best friend, Patroklos is killed. If Achilles had exhibited the blind faith in Agamemnon that Noah and Abraham did in Genesis, his best friend would not have been killed by Hektor. In both Genesis and the Iliad, however, the disobedient still reap some rewards. Even though she has disobeyed God, Eve is still made the mother of the human race. Even though he is responsible for the death of his best friend, Achilles still achieves kleos. In both Genesis and the Iliad the lack of foresight by those who are supposed to be the rulers is evident. If Agamemnon had known that Achilles was going to be disobedient, even when Achilles saw the death and destruction of his countrymen, Agamemnon might have hesitated before talking Achilles<sup>1</sup> war prize away from him. In Book Nine of the Iliad, Agamemnon tries to apologize by sending ambassadors to Achilles so that he will come back to the battle, but Achilles refuses. Achilles<sup>1</sup> absence in the battles of the Iliad causes Agamemnon considerable strife and regret. The reader can infer from Genesis that God also feels regret from his lack of foresight. God did not expect that Eve would

disobey him, and therefore he placed the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden. Since Adam and Eve eat from this tree mankind gained the knowledge of good and evil, and throughout the rest of The Bible, this knowledge is always causing God problems. God is so concerned about the disobedience of Adam and Eve that he sends them away from the Garden of Eden because he is afraid they will eat from the tree of life and live forever (Gen. 3. 22-23). If there is one symbol which represents disobedience in Genesis it is the serpent which tricks Eve into eating from the forbidden tree. The use of a non-human character (i. e. the serpent) to instigate evil suggests that disobedience was not originally a human characteristic. After Adam and Eve gain the knowledge of good and evil, disobedience becomes a distinctly human trait, and human energy is concentrated on how to obey and to not give in to temptation. In the Iliad, evil is a characteristic of the gods as well as the mortals. For example, Hera is always conjuring up ways to trick and disobey her husband, Zeus. Hera and Athena are constantly trying to do harm to their rival, Aphrodite. Since the God in Genesis only favors those who are most obedient, he offers a contrast to the Greek gods, who favor the men who are the strongest, wisest, most beautiful, and most warlike. This variance in what the gods and God favor is important because it helps to explain why the language in the Iliad is so different from the language in Genesis. While much of the Iliad concentrates on describing the physical and mental characteristics of the characters, Genesis rarely gives details about its characters<sup>1</sup> traits. For example, it is often mentioned by Homer that Achilles is admired by the gods because he is the strongest of men, that Odysseus is favored by Athena

because he is wise, or that Paris is favored by Aphrodite because of his beauty. In Genesis, however, God favors men only because they are obedient and fearful of him. For example, there is no physical description of Adam, Eve, Noah or Abraham. Each of these characters is favored or not favored by God according to his or her deeds. In fact, the intellectual thoughts or emotions of these characters are rarely mentioned directly. Because of this the book of Genesis implies that the physical and mental capacities of an individual are not important; all that matters is obedience and submission to God. In conclusion, a reader can determine the relationship between the character of a book and God by looking at how much emphasis the author of the book places on obedience. The characters in the Iliad fear the gods, but it seems like the gods in the Iliad are more concerned with receiving respect or honor from humans rather than blind obedience. If one of the roles of religion is to make people live in fear of doing wrong and to directly obey the word of God then it is obvious why Genesis is the considered by many as the introduction to the handbook on how to live.