

A Sense of Guilt Among the Early Greeks? (C. S. Lewis)

Post by “Joshua” of August 27, 2023 at 12:29 AM

Quote

“The greatest barrier I have met is the almost total absence from the minds of my audience of any sense of sin... The early Christian preachers could assume in their hearers, whether Jews, Metuentes, or Pagans, a sense of guilt. (That this was common among Pagans is shown by the fact that both Epicureanism and the mystery religions both claimed, though in different ways, to assuage it.) Thus the Christian message was in those days unmistakably the Evangelium, the Good News. It promised healing to those who knew they were sick. We have to convince our hearers of the unwelcome diagnosis before we can expect them to welcome the news of the remedy.

The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man, the roles are quite reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. He is quite a kindly judge; if God should have a reasonable defense for being the god who permits war, poverty, and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God’s acquittal. But the important thing is that man is on the bench and God is in the dock.”

— C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*

Came across this quote this evening, and I am completely unimpressed by Lewis' argument-in-parentheses. The Greeks were not, to my mind, overly burdened by the feeling guilt, and Epicureanism did not spare much time in trying to assuage it. Actually, I more than half suspect that Lewis is basing that claim almost entirely on the so-called Riddle of Epicurus, which really does place God in the dock, but let that pass. Here are several reasons why I think that the Hebrew/Christian concept of sin is totally foreign to the pagan Greeks;

- The idea of fate was with Greek culture from the beginning. "Sin" requires absolute free will, it is meaningless where fate is concerned.
 - The story of the Iliad is the story of Achilles, a warlord with a line of ambiguity running crossing his fate--if he stays home, he will live a long life and father many descendants. But when they die his name will be forgotten. If he sails to Troy he will die in battle, but his name will echo through eternity. But hey, at least Achilles gets to know his fate ahead of time. If only Oedipus had been granted similar foresight!
- "Sin" is meaningless under polytheism. While it's possible to aggravate one or more gods, the gods themselves are also at cross purposes. To offend one god was very often to find

yourself in the good graces of another. The Iliad again offers the prime example, with all of Olympus divided over the progress of the war. In fact, where the gods disagreed it would be impossible not to "sin" against one or more of them. Sin fundamentally requires monotheism--a single ultimate source of moral authority. No one could possibly take seriously the idea that Zeus was a great moral authority. His authority derived from his power, not from his goodness.

- The Greek afterlife was not generally a place either of punishment or reward. Those were the outliers; for the great mass of humanity there was one fate for the whole of them--mere mindless continuation.
- At the outset of his project to weigh and balance the claims of the different philosophical schools, Cicero explains his reason for undertaking the debate--*There are as many opinions as there are men*. What has Jerusalem to do with Athens? In this respect, nothing; for the Greeks, the project of philosophy demanded consideration of many viewpoints. The freedom of choice is implicit in the whole business. The Christians took the Greek word for choice and twisted it into something heinous--*heresy*.

According to Dr. Henk S. Versnel, University of Leiden, in the Oxford Classical Dictionary, "*The modern term [sin] has no equivalent in either Greek or Latin. The Christian concept of sin accommodates two basic and coherent senses: offence against moral codes, and action against the laws or the will of God. It presupposes conscious voluntariness, while remorse may be associated with its consequences, interpreted as an expression of estrangement from God. Although some of these characteristics can be found in the archaic and classical religions of Greece and Rome, as a whole this complex is not clearly represented.*"