

Lucian: Zeus Cross-Examined

Post by "Cassius" of February 14, 2019 at 3:06 PM

Zeus Cross-Examined

Characters: Cyniscus. Zeus

Context: Zeus is cross-examined by Cyniscus about the supposed role of Fate in human affairs, and how Fate squares with the supposed powers of the gods.

Cyniscus. Zeus: I am not going to trouble you with requests for a fortune or a throne; you get prayers enough of that sort from other people, and from your habit of convenient deafness I gather that you experience a difficulty in answering them. But there is one thing I should like, which would cost you no trouble to grant.

Zeus. Well, Cyniscus? You shall not be disappointed, if your expectations are as reasonable as you say.

Cyniscus. I want to ask you a plain question.

Zeus. Such a modest petition is soon granted; ask what you will.

Cyniscus. Well then: you know your Homer and Hesiod, of course? Is it all true that they sing of Destiny and the Fates--that whatever they spin for a man at his birth must inevitably come about?

Zeus. Unquestionably. Nothing is independent of their control. From their spindle hangs the life of all created things; whose end is predetermined even from the moment of their birth; and that law knows no change.

Cyniscus. Then when Homer says, for instance, in another place, Lest unto Hell thou go, outstripping Fate, he is talking nonsense, of course?

Zeus. Absolute nonsense. Such a thing is impossible: the law of the Fates, the thread of Destiny, is over all. No; so long as the poets are under the inspiration of the Muses, they speak truth: but once let those Goddesses leave them to their own devices, and they make blunders and contradict themselves. Nor can we blame them: they are but men; how should they know truth, when the divinity whose mouthpieces they were is departed from them?

Cyniscus. That point is settled, then. But there is another thing I want to know. There are three Fates, are there not,--Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropus?

Zeus. Quite so.

Cyniscus. But one also hears a great deal about Destiny and Fortune. Who are they, and what is the extent of their power? Is it equal to that of the Fates? or greater perhaps? People are always talking about the insuperable might of Fortune and Destiny.

Zeus. It is not proper, Cyniscus, that you should know all. But what made you ask me about the Fates?

Cyniscus. Ah, you must tell me one thing more first. Do the Fates also control you Gods? Do you depend from their thread?

Zeus. We do. Why do you smile?

Cyniscus. I was thinking of that bit in Homer, where he makes you address the Gods in council, and threaten to suspend all the world from a golden cord. You said, you know, that you would let the cord down from Heaven, and all the Gods together, if they liked, might take hold of it and try to pull you down, and they would never do it: whereas you, if you had a mind to it, could easily pull them up, And Earth and Sea withal.

I listened to that passage with shuddering reverence; I was much impressed with the idea of your strength. Yet now I understand that you and your cord and your threats all depend from a mere cobweb. It seems to me Clotho should be the one to boast: she has you dangling from her distaff, like a sprat at the end of a fishing-line.

Zeus. I do not catch the drift of your questions.

Cyniscus. Come, I will speak my mind; and in the name of Destiny and the Fates take not my candour amiss. If the case stands thus, if the Fates are mistresses of all, and their decisions unalterable, then why do men sacrifice to you, and bring hecatombs, and pray for good at your hands? If our prayers can neither save us from evil nor procure us any boon from Heaven, I fail to see what we get for our trouble.

Zeus. These are nice questions! I see how it is,--you have been with the sophists; accursed race! who would deny us all concern in human affairs. Yes, these are just the points they raise, impiously seeking to pervert mankind from the way of sacrifice and prayer: it is all thrown away, forsooth! the Gods take no thought for mankind; they have no power on the earth.--Ah well; they will be sorry for it some day.

Cyniscus. Now, by Clotho's own spindle, my questions are free from all sophistic taint. How it has come about, I know not; but one word has brought up another, and the end of it is--there is no use in sacrifice. Let us begin again. I will put you a few more questions; answer me frankly, but think before you speak, this time.

Zeus. Well; if you have the time to waste on such tomfoolery.

Cyniscus. Everything proceeds from the Fates, you say?

Zeus. Yes.

Cyniscus. And is it in your power to unspin what they have spun?

Zeus. It is not.

Cyniscus. Shall I proceed, or is the inference clear?

Zeus. Oh, clear enough. But you seem to think that people sacrifice to us from ulterior motives; that they are driving a bargain with us, buying blessings, as it were: not at all; it is a disinterested testimony to our superior merit.

Cyniscus. There you are, then. As you say, sacrifice answers no useful purpose; it is just our good-natured way of acknowledging your superiority. And mind you, if we had a sophist here, he would want to know all about that superiority. You are our fellow slaves, he would say; if the Fates are our mistresses, they are also yours. Your immortality will not serve you; that only makes things worse. We mortals, after all, are liberated by death: but for you there is no end to the evil; that long thread of yours means eternal servitude.

Zeus. But this eternity is an eternity of happiness; the life of Gods is one round of blessings.

Cyniscus. Not all Gods' lives. Even in Heaven there are distinctions, not to say mismanagement. You are happy, of course: you are king, and you can haul up earth and sea as it were a bucket from the well. But look at Hephaestus: a cripple; a common blacksmith. Look at Prometheus: he gets nailed up on Caucasus. And I need not remind you that your own father lies fettered in Tartarus at this hour. It seems, too, that Gods are liable to fall in love; and to receive wounds; nay, they may even have to take service with mortal men; witness your brother Posidon, and Apollo, servants to Laomedon and to Admetus. I see no great happiness in all this; some of you I dare say have a very pleasant time of it, but not so others. I might have added, that you are subject to robbery like the rest of us; your temples get plundered, and the richest of you becomes a pauper in the twinkling of an eye. To more than one of you it has even happened to be melted down, if he was a gold or a silver God. All destiny, of course.

Zeus. Take care, Cyniscus: you are going too far. You will repent of this one day.

Cyniscus. Spare your threats: you know that nothing can happen to me, except what Fate has settled first. I notice, for instance, that even temple-robbers do not always get punished; most of them, indeed, slip through your hands. Not destined to be caught, I suppose.

Zeus. I knew it! you are one of those who would abolish Providence.

Cyniscus. You seem to be very much afraid of these gentlemen, for some reason. Not one word can I say, but you must think I picked it up from them. Oblige me by answering another question; I could desire no better authority than yours. What is this Providence? Is she a Fate too? or some greater, a mistress of the Fates?

Zeus. I have already told you that there are things which it is not proper for you to know. You said you were only going to ask me one question, instead of which you go on quibbling without end. I see what it is you are at: you want to make out that we Gods take no thought for human affairs.

Cyniscus. It is nothing to do with me: it was you who said just now that the Fates ordained everything. Have you thought better of it? Are you going to retract what you said? Are the Gods going to push Destiny aside and make a bid for government?

Zeus. Not at all; but the Fates work through us.

Cyniscus. I see: you are their servants, their underlings. But that comes to the same thing: it is still they who design; you are only their tools, their instruments.

Zeus. How do you make that out?

Cyniscus. I suppose it is pretty much the same as with a carpenter's adze and drill: they do assist him in his work, but no one would describe them as the workmen; we do not say that a ship has been turned out by such and such an adze, or by such and such a drill; we name the shipwright. In the same way, Destiny and the Fates are the universal shipwrights, and you are their drills and adzes; and it seems to me that instead of paying their respects and their sacrifices to you, men ought to sacrifice to Destiny, and implore her favours; though even that would not meet the case, because I take it that things are settled once and for all, and that the Fates themselves are not at liberty to chop and change. If some one gave the spindle a turn in the wrong direction, and undid all Clotho's work, Atropus would have something to say on the subject.

Zeus. So! You would deprive even the Fates of honour? You seem determined to reduce all to one level. Well, we Gods have at least one claim on you: we do prophesy and foretell what the Fates have disposed.

Cyniscus. Now even granting that you do, what is the use of knowing what one has to expect, when one can by no possibility take any precautions? Are you going to tell me that a man who finds out that he is to die by a steel point can escape the doom by shutting himself up? Not he. Fate will take him out hunting, and there will be his steel: Adrastus will hurl his spear at the boar, miss the brute, and get Croesus's son; Fate's inflexible law directs his aim. The full absurdity of the thing is seen in the case of Laius: "Seek not for offspring in the Gods' despite; Beget a child, and thou begett'st thy slayer."

Was not this advice superfluous, seeing that the end must come? Accordingly we find that the oracle does not deter Laius from begetting a son, nor that son from being his slayer. On the whole, I cannot see that your prophecies entitle you to reward, even setting aside the obscurity of the oracles, which are generally contrived to cut both ways. You omitted to mention, for instance, whether Croesus--'the Halys crossed'--should destroy his own or Cyrus's mighty realm.' It might be either, so far as the oracle goes.

Zeus. Apollo was angry with Croesus. When Croesus boiled that lamb and tortoise together in the cauldron, he was making trial of Apollo.

Cyniscus. Gods ought not to be angry. After all, I suppose it was fated that the Lydian should misinterpret that oracle; his case only serves to illustrate that general ignorance of the future, which Destiny has appointed for mankind. At that rate, your prophetic power too seems to be in her hands.

Zeus. You leave us nothing, then? We exercise no control, we are not entitled to sacrifice, we are very drills and adzes. But you may well despise me: why do I sit here listening to all this, with my thunder-bolt beneath my arm?

Cyniscus. Nay, smite, if the thunder-bolt is my destiny. I shall think none the worse of you; I shall know it is all Clotho's doing; I will not even blame the bolt that wounds me. And by the way--talking of thunder-bolts--there is one thing I will ask you and Destiny to explain; you can answer for her. Why is it that you leave all the pirates and temple-robbers and ruffians and perjurers to themselves, and direct your shafts (as you are always doing) against an oak-tree or a stone or a harmless mast, or even an honest, God-fearing traveller? . . . No answer? Is this one of the things it is not proper for me to know?

Zeus. It is, Cyniscus. You are a meddlesome fellow; I don't know where you picked up all these ideas.

Cyniscus. Well, I suppose I must not ask you all (Providence and Destiny and you) why honest Phocion died in utter poverty and destitution, like Aristides before him, while those two unwhipped puppies, Callias and Alcibiades, and the ruffian Midias, and that Aeginetan libertine Charops, who starved his own mother to death, were all rolling in money? nor again why Socrates was handed over to the Eleven instead of Meletus? nor yet why the effeminate Sardanapalus was a king, and one high-minded Persian after another went to the cross for refusing to countenance his doings? I say nothing of our own days, in which villains and money-grubbers prosper, and honest men are oppressed with want and sickness and a thousand distresses, and can hardly call their souls their own.

Zeus. Surely you know, Cyniscus, what punishments await the evil-doers after death, and how happy will be the lot of the righteous?

Cyniscus. Ah, to be sure: Hades--Tityus--Tantalus. Whether there is such a place as Hades, I shall be able to satisfy myself when I die. In the meantime, I had rather live a pleasant life here, and have a score or so of vultures at my liver when I am dead, than thirst like Tantalus in this world, on the chance of drinking with the heroes in the Isles of the Blest, and reclining in the fields of Elysium.

Zeus. What! you doubt that there are punishments and rewards to come? You doubt of that judgement-seat before which every soul is arraigned?

Cyniscus. I have heard mention of a judge in that connexion; one Minos, a Cretan. Ah, yes, tell me about him: they say he is your son?

Zeus. And what of him?

Cyniscus. Whom does he punish in particular?

Zeus. Whom but the wicked? Murderers, for instance, and temple-robbers.

Cyniscus. And whom does he send to dwell with the heroes?

Zeus. Good men and God-fearing, who have led virtuous lives.

Cyniscus. Why?

Zeus. Because they deserve punishment and reward respectively.

Cyniscus. Suppose a man commits a crime accidentally: does he punish him just the same?

Zeus. Certainly not.

Cyniscus. Similarly, if a man involuntarily performed a good action, he would not reward him?

Zeus. No.

Cyniscus. Then there is no one for him to reward or punish.

Zeus. How so?

Cyniscus. Why, we men do nothing of our own free will: we are obeying an irresistible impulse,-- that is, if there is any truth in what we settled just now, about Fate's being the cause of everything. Does a man commit a murder? Fate is the murderess. Does he rob a temple? He has her instructions for it. So if there is going to be any justice in Minos's sentences, he will punish Destiny, not Sisyphus; Fate, not Tantalus. What harm did these men do? They only obeyed orders.

Zeus. I am not going to speak to you any more. You are an unscrupulous man; a sophist. I shall go away and leave you to yourself.

Cyniscus. I wanted to ask you where the Fates lived; and how they managed to attend to all the details of such a vast mass of business, just those three. I do not envy them their lot; they must have a busy time of it, with so much on their hands. Their destiny, apparently, is no better than other people's. I would not exchange with them, if I had the choice; I had rather be poorer than I am, than sit before such a spindleful, watching every thread.-- But never mind, if you would rather not answer. Your previous replies have quite cleared up my doubts about Destiny and Providence; and for the rest, I expect I was not destined to hear it.